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THE LOVE OF DUST

NOTE

All the characters and events described in this book are imaginary. No reference to any living person or persons is intended.

SHANKER RAM

THE LOVE OF DUST

By
SHANKER RAM



A. N. PURNAH & CO.

PUBLISHERS

**6, First Street, Abhiramapuram
Bheemannahpet, Mylapore**

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[Price Rs. 3

August 1938

The Central Art Press, Madras.

To

Prof. J. C. ROLLO, M. A.
The Kindest of Teachers

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but still they would willingly endure all the stinging tortures of a prickly pear bush to get at a solitary fruit.

All this passion for the possession of mangoes was more or less satiated one summer afternoon, as they hurried from tree to tree, with an everincreasing load of fruits tugging at their waists.

The sky was overcast with clouds, and a fierce wind was bent upon driving them away and in its mad fury against them, it shook the trees to their very roots.

The trees struggling for their existence divested themselves of all that they could shed. Ripe mangoes, squirrel-bitten mangoes, and even green mangoes were showered on them in plenty. Though every child was overburdened with mangoes, yet not one of them was willing to get away from under the trees. But the clouds eventually triumphed and it rained. For the mere rain, the children had never cared. Further, they were not altogether shelterless. Wherever they roamed, the thick foliage of some tree or other offered them protection. But very soon they found that some shiny and stony things, of the size of a marble, were penetrating through the foliage and dropping all round them, as well as on their persons.

They were bitingly cold and slippery to the touch. The children were immensely amused. There were about twenty of them, of ages ranging from six to twelve, and very few of them had seen hailstones before ; and when one of them with the importance of his superior knowledge, was explaining to the rest what they were, the stones which were merely *settling* on them till now, began to hit them with a sting.

By and by the pelting became more severe. They got alarmed and fled in panic to the thatched shed in old Vyapuri's cocoanut grove, about a hundred yards away. But the old fool had recently fenced his grove. Of course, he had provided it with a stile, but it was difficult for the poor children to scramble over it with their heavy burdens. And when Valli was struggling to get over, Mallan impatiently pushed her aside. Valli lost her balance and tumbled into the irrigational runnel, close by the stile. She let out a piercing scream, and Velan, who had just preceded her, turned round, and letting go his hold on his mangoes, frantically clambered over the stile and jumped into the ditch. Valli had already risen to her feet and was sobbing. She was soaked to the skin and her clothing was dripping with the muddy water.

The ditch was nearly five feet deep and its deep clayey sides were wet and slippery. There

was no hold by which one could get up the bank—not even a stray dangling root to clutch. In his eagerness to take her to a place of shelter, Velan lifted her up almost shoulder high, when his foot slipped. They both fell down in a heap. He quickly got to his feet and raised Valli.

“Oh, what a foolish thing I have done!—Are you hurt?” he asked remorsefully not minding the sprain in his own ankle.

“Not at all,” said Valli who, by now, had not only recovered from her fright but also stopped weeping. “But how are we to get out of this?” she asked impatiently.

“I’ll lift you again. This time I’ll be very careful,” he promised.

But Valli shook her head.

“Well then, I’ll squat down, and you sit on my shoulders and hold on to my head. I’ll get up slowly and you can reach the bank.”

“And then, I’ll pull you up,” she said spiritedly.

“Oh, you can’t do that,” he said smiling. “But don’t worry. Somehow, I’ll get out.”

“How?” she insisted.

"Oh, just like this," he said spreading out his hands and legs and pressing them against the sides of the runnel. Then alternately resting on each foot, he ascended till he was within reach of the wooden post of the stile, which he seized with both hands and drew himself up.

Just then a hailstone hit him on his head and wincing under the pain, he rubbed the spot with his fingers. Till now they were quite oblivious of the danger of the hailstones, and they both looked up quickly. It was only now that they realized how fortunate they had been even in their misfortune. For, in addition to the spreading branch of a mango tree in Vyapuri's garden which overhung the stile, there was also an aged cocoanut palm from a neighbouring paddy field which swung out its head giraffe-like and held it like an umbrella, just above the stile.

It was all a minute's work for Velan—to jump again into the runnel and help Valli as well as himself out of it. And when they came panting into the shed and saw the other children in the possession of all their fruits and some even eating them, they felt sad about their own loss. But most of their friends were kind and sympathetic. They forced on them a portion of their pickings. The result was that Velan and Valli had much more than what they had actually collected.

Mallan alone had kept aloof from all this display of affection and friendship. Sitting in a lone corner, he was lost in the enjoyment of a very juicy fruit. When Valli's eyes lighted on him, she burst out vehemently. "It was that monkey who did it," she said pointing to him with an accusing finger.

"Yes," chimed a chorus of voices.

"I—I—I too saw that," said little Kichen stammering.

"But what is it?" enquired Velan impatiently.

"He pushed me into the ditch," said Valli with quivering lips and moistening eyes.

"You didn't tell me before.—But why?"

"Just to get over the stile before me. Don't you know his selfishness?" she said and thereby fomented a quarrel. Velan straightened himself up and marched towards Mallan, eagerly followed by the rest.

Velan was about twelve years old, rather tall for his age and very fair—as complexions go among a swarthy people. He had big round eyes, a rather pointed nose, and an almost perpetual smile on his lips. Nature had endowed him with a generous build which was being tempered and shaped by an open air life and agricultural labour,

which, though he was not called upon to do it, he delighted in doing.

“What for did you push her into the ditch?” he demanded, glowering over Mallan, who had not yet finished eating his mango and was licking with great relish the juice on the back of his hand.

Mallan blinked uneasily. There was unmistakable fright on his face. Though some months older than Velan, he looked exceedingly small before the latter's formidable figure.

His thin frail form, his stunted growth, and the lack of sufficient flesh on his body to cement the gaping bones suggested not merely a congenital weakness but also an ill nourished infancy. And as if to make up for all these deficiencies, his head was swollen out of all proportion to his slim neck, on which it rested in an ungainly manner. His face was pitted with smallpox and his pop eyes conveyed an impression that, whether asleep or awake, his eyelids would never close.

Assuredly, he was not of the kind either to provoke or defend a fight. He would not or rather could not speak.

“Why did you do it, you pop-eyed scoundrel?” said Velan more menacingly.

“I didn't do it. She lost her step and fell down,” Mallan managed to grunt.

“Oh! What a horrible liar!” exclaimed Valli, screwing her lips and closing her mouth with her hand.

“I saw you doing it,” shouted another, and instantaneously Velan gave him a slap on the cheek. Mallan let out a howl, and the only retort he could make was a shower of abuse.

Whereupon Velan got still more infuriated and thrashed him severely. Finding that abuses brought him greater humiliation and punishment, he resorted to impotent threats.

“I shall tell my father, you arrogant —”

“You can tell your grandfather and great grandfather as well,” taunted Velan and left him booing.

It was strange that nobody in that crowd had so much as a kind word for Mallan and the poor fellow was left to console himself as best he could. The patter of the hailstones gradually ceased, and as soon as it was safe enough to emerge into the open, the children scampered away to their homes.

CHAPTER II

THE INEVITABLE AUNT

As he got nearer home, Mallan's pace slowed down and his heart grew heavier. His grip on the load of mangoes relaxed and he was even unmindful of some of them slipping away from an open corner. The thought that love and sympathy would very soon be lavished on him at home magnified the pain of his injuries, mental as well as physical. His eyes were swollen with weeping, and his chin sagged to the left — as it always did whenever he wept. The tears trickled down his cheeks to the pressure of his low sobs. His mother, who was standing at the gate near the pial, was the first to notice his plight. "Oh, my dear! Oh, my dear!" she cried running up to him and hugging him. "Who was that wretch who hurt you?" she enquired tenderly.

But Mallan spurned aside her loving attentions. "You — you get away," he whined contemptuously and went into the house.

His aunt and father were leisurely removing the pods off the tamarind fruits and discussing the prospects of the next crop....and he burst in upon them with a loud wail.

“My darling! darling!!” cried his aunt, Meenakshi, in a husky voice, spreading out her arms and drawing him to her bosom, while Mayandi anxiously bent over his beloved son and scanned his features.

A little apart, stood his mother, Thevanai, mutely watching the ministrations of the father and aunt. In spite of their loving entreaties, it was some time before Mallan would cease sobbing and explain matters coherently.

“Was there ever a more atrocious thing?..... to be pounded like this, merely because that brat of a girl, Veerappan’s daughter, slipped and fell down?” said Meenakshi indignantly, her husky voice almost becoming indistinct.

“Velan imagines she is already his wife,” meekly put in Mayandi.

“Let him imagine anything. Let them marry or perform Sati*—we don’t care. But why should the brute injure him like this?” she demanded,

(* the wife mounting the funeral pyre along with her dead husband, to be burnt to death.)

the last few words almost drowned in her emotion. "It is their arrogance of property," said Mayandi. "Property?—their property be cursed! How long is it going to last? Veerappan is already on the downward path, and for a spendthrift like Venkatachalam even a crore will not hold out for long."

"But just now, they are the big men of the village and their word is law," said Mayandi.

"Don't sit here, 'bigging' everybody," frowned Meenakshi, and noticing for the first time a large gaping wound in Mallan's knee cap, she flew into a fury and denounced Velan and his people too into the bargain.....not knowing that the wound was only an old sore reopened.

"You go at once to Venkatachalam, and let him know the brutality of the dog he is bringing up. If he has no children, should he use his money for breeding rowdies and ruffians?..... Couldn't he build a choultry or a resthouse? And tell him that if he doesn't make him mend his ways — if he doesn't punish him for his misbehaviour to-day — we will prosecute him. Get up and go," she ordered.

Mayandi awkwardly shuffled his hands without moving and said "We shouldn't go to extremes. After all this is a quarrel between children."

"You are a coward!" shrieked Meenakshi and that violent effort choked her. She struggled with her cough and motioned for a cup of water. Thevanai quickly fetched it, and Mayandi seized it from her hands and attempted to pour it down his sister's throat. But Meenakshi pushed him aside and snatching the tumbler, drank the water. It had the desired effect, and as she sat quietly wiping her eyes and still gasping for breath, Mayandi said that he would see Venkatachalam immediately. She took no notice of his words.

"I shall go to him just now and put it strongly. I shall also report this to Veerappan and other elders of the village," he said. But even this brought no reply from her and Mayandi quietly sneaked away.

There could never have been two persons of the same flesh and blood different from each other in so many respects. Meenakshi was a big boned, massive and corpulent woman by whose side Mayandi, with his thin and fragile figure and wasted features, looked like a pigmy. The expression of her face was masterful, and in a way repulsive too on account of her drooping eyelids and the thick and coarse lips. Her hoarse voice, which gave the indication of a perpetual sore throat, did not tend to make her manner any more pleasant.

Whereas Mayandi, perhaps on account of long years of browbeating and dependence, had always the look of a hunted rabbit. In his over-anxiety to please all, and particularly his sister, he had formed a habit of smiling for no reason at all, in season and out of season, which gave a silly aspect to his face. Nor did his thin and screeching voice in any way help to make a man of him.

For some minutes after Mayandi had left, Meenakshi sat silent, softly stroking Mallan's head, who had forgotten all his woes in the midst of this confusion. Then she began to fret and murmur to herself in her own inimitable manner. "The lazy fellow, he never can do a thing. For every thing I must bestir myself—I, a helpless widow. And he is a *man*. The dunce! He can eat like a pig; that is all he knows."

No self-respecting woman would ever tolerate such talk about her husband from anyone, but Thevanai had quite forgotten what self-respect was.

Eight years of patronage by a rich but childless widow had done the trick for her and her husband. She stood motionless like a statue, with her chin cupped in the hollow of her palm, and patiently waited for her sister-in-law's rage to exhaust itself. Just then, there was a loud metallic noise from

the kitchen as if some vessels had been thrown in pell mell.

“Did you leave open the kitchen door?” fumed Meenakshi, and Thevanai fled in panic to the kitchen at the back of the house. And what a sight for her! A lean and lanky youth of about eighteen, wearing a tattered cloth, confronted her with a half devoured morsel of food in his mouth and the rice pot in his hand.

“Oh, my mother’s heart!” sighed Thevanai, striking her breast. “She may come here! Go to the backyard, behind the hay rick,” she said and hustled him out of the kitchen. Then bolting the kitchen door she went to Meenakshi and reported that a rat had knocked down a brass plate from the loft and that nothing was amiss. The explanation satisfied Meenakshi.

“Well, I am going to Thangammal’s house. Don’t throw open the front door and grouse in a corner, and let all the dogs and cattle stray into the house,” she admonished, and taking Mallan by the hand, went out.

Thevanai bolted the door after them. She could not have wished for anything better.

She hurried to the backyard where the starved youth was finishing his meal. She silently watched

him with tearful eyes. "When did you have your last meal?" she asked sorrowfully.

"What does it matter, Mother? Better late than never. Wasn't it too daring of me to get my food like this?" he said, attempting to grin.

But the words only wrung her heart and she sobbed bitterly.

"Oh, Chola, couldn't you find work somewhere and lead a happy life?"

"But my enemy wouldn't let me. Wherever I go in all our surrounding villages, I find that dreadful tales of my misbehaviour have preceded me. I have been painted as a liar, a thief, and a drunkard, and, mind you, this is a father's service to his son. The blackguard! One of these days, I shall break his legs and make a cripple of him."

"Oh, Chola, don't! don't!! He is after all your father. It is an unpardonable sin to talk of him in this strain. He is not to be blamed. It is our fate—in the shape of that accursed woman. How different would it be if she had not been widowed! She and her riches have ruined my home and happiness," she said and wept.

"But has he no brains? Couldn't he assert himself? I tell you, Mother, it is disgraceful, the kind of life he leads. You ought to hear what the

people think of him. I would sooner commit suicide—”

“Chola! Chola!! should you make me still more miserable? For heaven’s sake, do cease such talking. You accuse your father, but what about you? Should you disgrace yourself and me by drinking and loafing? You don’t seem to know that you are talked of in the village much more than anybody else.”

“But I have done nothing to be ashamed of—except having a drink or two occasionally, to take the load off my heart,” he said. “I seriously think of emigrating to Kandy or Malaya. The Kangani (labour recruiting agent) says one could make a fortune there. At any rate, my benevolent father cannot pursue me there and prevent me from earning a living. By the way, I saw him going to Venkatachalam’s house. What takes him there?—trying to offer loans and then deprive him of his property?” he said sarcastically.

“You horrible boy! Can’t you see anything good in him? Why do you collect on your head all these sins? But what is the use of blaming you? It is Fate that is goading you and my womb is accursed that it has given birth to such a child.

Stop! I think it is the washer-woman calling. For God's sake, go away," she said in great misery and left him.

And Cholan crest-fallen, climbed over the wall and went away.

CHAPTER III

A PIONEER

Thanks to the wet weather and the consequent disinclination for work, a large number of friends had collected on the spacious pial of Venkata-chalam's house. There was a lot of merry talk—though usually at the expense of somebody or other. Some of the older men were engaged in a serious discussion of their perpetual subject of agriculture, and were vainly trying to draw the attention of the younger folk to their topic. Madurai contributed most to the general mirth of the gathering. He had a way of making others split their sides with laughter by his sly and humorous insinuations without himself betraying so much as a smile on his lips.

There was a lively discussion going on as to how swollen limbs, whether of men or beasts, could be quickly treated. He was about to offer his own opinion on the subject, when he noticed Mayandi's arrival.

"You see, there is no use in wrangling about a subject of which most of us have but little experience. If you want to know all about it, ask Mayandi. I know he is an authority," averred Madurai.

Some men in the gathering burst into laughter.

"What is it?" enquired Mayandi a little dazed.

"We are talking about the best way of treating swellings," said Madurai, and there was another roar of laughter from the same persons.

The others — and Venkatachalam was among them — who could not see through the game, pressed their neighbours for enlightenment.

"I say, have you no other work but to pull somebody's leg?" mildly protested Mayandi, an irrepressible smile brightening for the nonce his wasted features.

"I am just stating facts. It is not all that could work such wonders," said Madurai. There was another peal of laughter. Venkatachalam's patience was tried.

"I say, what is the fun of laughing to yourselves without letting us know what it is about?" protested Venkatachalam.

"I am not laughing and it is not a matter for laughter," said Madurai. "If old Periyannan of

Kallipatti were here—"—and he prevented another burst of mirth by motioning with his hand—"You would certainly know what it is to laugh like this."

"Enough of this, Madurai. Do let me alone," said Mayandi indignantly.

But Madurai ignored him and proceeded. "On account of wind, or at any rate that is what he thought, Periyanna's body was swollen from head to foot. The old fellow couldn't stand the gripping pain, and he went in for every kind of treatment—but with no effect. Then one day Mayandi saw him. And Mayandi knew the remedy—" Here Mayandi made a feeble attempt to interrupt him but Madurai peremptorily silenced him and continued. "He ordered a viss or so of cashew nuts and fried them in a big earthen pan, till he drew about half a measure of cashew nut oil—you know it, the greasy, caustic stuff. Then, without polluting his hands—you know he is always careful—he smeared it all over the old man's body with the help of a coir brush, and went away, assuring him of perfect relief in a few hours.

For half an hour or so, Periyannan felt a sort of titillation. You know it is a sign of healing, and though he longed to scratch himself all over

his body, he restrained himself with great difficulty.

But, by and by, he had a sort of feeling as if a bucket of boiling water was thrown over him. Soon he was convinced that he had been thrown into a seething cauldron. He howled, yelled, and grew mad.

“I am burning, I am burning,” he cried. You see he was lying on his cot near the *Bhajana math* (place of worship) and it was some time before his widowed daughter could hear his cry and run to him. She tried to raise him, and she was surprised to find that his skin peeled off with her touch. She quickly understood the cause of his suffering and gently tried to remove all the oil from his person — but not without removing his skin as well. Of course, it took him two months to get round. But the medicine had worked wonderfully. Not only had all the swelling completely disappeared — he was reduced to a skeleton — but he had also changed his skin. But this is an ungrateful world — and to-day Mayandi dare not pass by Periyannan’s house whenever he goes to Kallipatti.”

“It is a lie,” frowned Mayandi.

"I will give you ten rupees if you come along with me to Periyannan's house," promised Madurai.

"Don't worry him. He did it in good faith," said Venkatachalam, coming to Mayandi's rescue.

Just then, Velan with a few of his friends shot into the house boisterously, and Mayandi remembered why he had come there. But Madurai's raillery — not to speak of the large gathering — had taken away the little determination he had, and he quietly sat down among the throng, a passive listener to the talk of the rest.

Taking advantage of a lull in the conversation, Grandpa Annamalai butted in. "I say, Venkatachalam, did you ever hear of the note-cancelling gram?"

"Note-cancelling gram! You always bring strange news, Grandpa."

"My dear fellow, truth is always strange. There is a kind of gram, similar to Bengal gram but three or four times its size, imported at Kalugupatti, which gives an amazing yield. You know Subhramania Padayachi of Kalugupatti. His circumstances were of late very bad—"

"But I am told he is on the lookout to invest some money on good wet lands in our parts."

“That is what I am going to tell you. He owes everything to this wonderful gram. It seems that some man returning from overseas gave him a few maunds of this gram and asked him to try it on his lands.

He secretly tried it on an acre of land. The result was nearly three times the usual crop. Then he staked all that was left of his fortune in a wholesale cultivation of this gram. He sowed all the two hundred and odd acres of his dry lands with it.

He waited anxiously. To add to his fears, the monsoon partly failed—you know it was only the year before last. But the plants once they had taken nourishment from the soil, never again lost their dark green. Oh! it was a wonderful sight, one vast and endless green carpet, so that he feared many evil eyes, and much was the money he spent on magicians and scarecrows to counteract their influence. And when in good time the harvesting came, Kuttian says that the women of four villages, working in the field furiously for a fortnight, were not able to finish the harvest. If he had stored his crop, it would be impossible to imagine what a gigantic heap it would have made—and it would, no doubt have gone to rot on account of some evil eye or other,

But being a shrewd fellow, he had contracted with the big merchants in the town for its removal, batch after batch. And believe me, that year his income was thirty thousand rupees excluding all expenses. No longer was he an indebted man. As it enabled him to cancel all his promissory notes, it somehow got named 'note-cancelling gram'. Now it is all the rage in those parts."

"It sounds like a fairy tale, Grandpa," said Venkatachalam, who, like everybody else, had been listening to the old man's narrative with rapt attention.

"Fairy tale! I shall ask Kuttyan himself to tell you everything. You know Kuttyan of Veralimalai—my brother-in-law's son. He came here yesterday and went away in a hurry to Srirangam to take his sister home. He will stop here on his way back and you shall hear everything from his own lips."

"Why, Kalugupatti is not far off. It is only a matter of fifty miles. We could go there and look into the affair ourselves," suggested Madurai.

"That was well said," applauded Grandpa Annamalai. "Nothing like one going and learning facts for one's self."

“What do you say, Veerappa? Shall we start to-morrow? My Kangayam bulls are without work, and the bandy (cart) was overhauled only last month. I have replaced the old axle with a spring one and we can have a pleasant trip. I am sure Madurai would like to come along with us.—And what about you, Grandpa? Will you come too?”

“Most willingly,” said the old man.

“We can break our journey at Musiri. You know the day after to-morrow is the river festival there. The deities of something like twelve villages will be brought in a procession to the river. So our trip can be made one of pilgrimage, pleasure, and business,” said Madurai smiling.

“Madurai, you are a capital fellow. I forgot all about the Poosam festival. Why, Musiri is just half way to Kalugupatti,” said Grandpa Annamalai with great animation.

“Well, what do you say, Veerappa? You don’t open your mouth,” said Venkatachalam.

“Where is the hurry?” said Veerappan puckering his face and throwing cold water on the enthusiasm of the rest. “It was only last year that you wasted five hundred rupees in experimenting with the Java sugar cane,”

“How can you call it a waste? You can’t learn anything without a little bungling in the beginning. And do you think that if I had not found out the proper method, Sedayan, Kandan, and all the others would have been able to raise such a fine crop this year? Oh, no. Don’t call it waste at all. Why, do you know, this year’s output of jaggery from my field, the Reed Bush, was nearly seven hundred maunds, and I have almost made up my last year’s loss?”

“May be; but the two hundred rupees you borrowed is still unpaid. Isn’t it?”

“Oh, that is no fault of the crop. We spend money in ever so many ways. So far as my experiment was concerned, it was not at all a failure.”

“Well, I don’t want to discuss all that, just now. I simply said there was no hurry,” said Veerappan rather curtly.

“But I am not going to risk any money now. I am going there only to verify what Grandpa Annamalai has heard about this ‘note-cancelling’ gram,” said Venkatachalam, winking at the old man. But there was in his tone an unmistakable anxiety not to go counter to the wishes of Veerappan.

"That is all right, then. But it is my fear that you will not stop with this mere 'verification'," said Veerappan smiling.

"You needn't fear at all. Pray, where is the money?" he asked.

Just then, Velan came bounding out of the house, with a small package in his hand, and cried, "Papa, Mamma wants you."

"What is that packet in your hand?" enquired Madurai.

"Cocoanut cakes."

"And whither are you galloping?"

"To Valli's house."

"Ah, you cunning fellow, should you give everything to your sweetheart and nothing to your uncle?"

"Oh, be quiet, Uncle," said the boy grinning and ran away.

And as soon as Venkatachalam, excusing himself, went in, the gathering also gradually dispersed.

CHAPTER IV

A MATCHMAKER'S SOLICITUDE

While Mayandi sat listlessly and with a woebegone look on Venkatachalam's pial, his sister Meenakshi was vigorously cursing Velan with "bell, book, and candle" at Thangammal's house. After having thus pacified her angry heart, she fell to discussing the assets and liabilities of the various villagers.

It was evening and the cattle, having somehow sheltered themselves during the hailstorm, were slowly returning home. They were unguided, since the cattle boys had gone home after having driven them up to the entrance to the village. But the animals who were housed in the backyards of their owners, knew their homes only too well, and plunged into them, upsetting whatever was carelessly left in their way.

Thangammal was looking for her own buffalo amongst that straggling herd, and listening to

Meenakshi's plans regarding her financial investments, when she suddenly burst into laughter.

Meenakshi stopped her talk abruptly. She imagined she was being laughed at.

"Why do you laugh?" she enquired, a little hurt.

"Oh, it is that boy, Velan. Really, he is suffering from too much energy. With hands full, he leapt on to the back of a buffalo like a monkey and is enjoying a ride. Look at him," she said with ill-concealed admiration.

"I can't see anything wonderful in the antics of a monkey," said Meenakshi disgustedly, but at the same time she shaded her eyes with her hand, and looked in the direction pointed out. Sitting crosswise, and holding aloft a parcel of cocoanut cakes in either hand, Velan was rollicking to the slow motion of the beast.

"He looks the very image of Yama," (the god of death) she said with a gruff emphasis on the last word.

"What do you mean?" said Thangammal in mild retort.

"I doubt if there is any other boy in the village who has got his *looks*."

"What a fool you are!" protested Meenakshi in her turn. "I didn't mean to say that he was ugly; though, really, I don't understand what looks have got to do with a boy. But the buffalo is the mount of Yama, and should a boy ride him — and in this reckless fashion?"

"Ah, what do children know?" said Thangammal.

"Quite true; but they should be taught to know. It is the up-bringing that is responsible. You cannot allow the boy to go his own way and then expect him to develop all good qualities. Not a day passes without his fighting somebody or other, and risking his limbs and even his life in foolhardy acts. I tell you, in spite of all his looks, he has no brains. One of these days, I am sure he will break his neck. The other day, I was told, the idiot dived into the river from the topmost branch of a margosa tree near the embankment. Suppose he had struck a stone or a submerged tree, or anything hard. What would have been his fate? Would our Mallan ever do it?" she said, almost passionately touching her bosom with her hand.

"Never," said Thangammal with a promptness that somehow seemed out of place.

"And it is to this kind of fellow that your friend Lakshmi wants to sacrifice her daughter.

He will never make her happy; you can be certain of it," proclaimed Meenakshi.

"It is none of our business. Besides, I don't think he will grow to be as bad as that," said Thangammal.

"There again, you are foolish. Believe me — I am older than you. The old saying "from the cradle to the grave" never went false. The only consideration may be the property he may inherit. But I tell you in confidence," she said lowering her voice to a whisper which was rendered almost indistinct by the inevitable hoarseness, "if Venkatachalam, does not clear the Pillai's dues within three years, most of his property will come up for auction, and they say that the Pillai, who is a sharp fellow, has his eyes on his lands. That is why he is freely lending to him whenever he wants money. You will see the truth of what I say, not now, but after a year or two."

"Really, I can't understand you, Meenakshi. What do you think he owes?"

"Say between four and five thousand rupees," said Meenakshi.

"You believe that for a debt of five thousand, a property worth nearly twenty five thousand will be taken? Why, anyone would offer ten thousand for his cocoanut grove alone."

"Yes, if he would sell it."

"If his whole estate is threatened, he surely will."

"After so many years, is this all you have learnt of him?" said Meenakshi, clutching her chin with her thumb and forefinger.

"Well, every one loves what belongs to him — that is nothing strange!"

"But there is a difference. He says that all his lands have a history behind them and always boasts of the traditions of his family."

"Well he might. You know the lands belonged to his family for centuries. They were a gift for services to the State, and even to-day they are tax-free."

"I know that, and that is why I say he will never part with them. Now look at Muniswami. Poor fellow! all his wet lands were heavily mortgaged. He had absolutely no hope of paying his debts without selling his lands. So he sold them for a good price to that Kangani from Mylavaram, and with what remained after adjusting his loans he has bought a few acres of dry lands near the Kali temple. The soil seems

suitable for the pulses and he is making a decent living out of his farm.—Now has he lost caste with you?”

“Whoever said that?” said Thangammal.

“That is what your Venkatachalam says. You know he and Muniswami are second cousins; and he is airing his views to everybody, and declaring that had he been in Muniswami’s position, he would rather have committed suicide than sold his lands to that slave dealer. This is what he calls the Kangani, and what do you think of that?”

“Foolishness.”

“Not foolishness but arrogance --- and a bitter feeling that the family has been lowered by the Kangani’s purchase. The idiot does not know that Fortune will not smile on one for ever. When we know that even emperors have been reduced to beggary, what is there to wonder at if a petty farmer comes to grief?”

“You talk as if Venkatachalam had already taken to the beggar’s bowl,” protested Thangammal. “One can see the way things are moving. If he would forget his stupid prestige, even now he could save himself. I shall offer to pay all his debts if he will consent to give his paddy field ‘The Snail Farm’ in return.”

"So you are after the best wet land in the village," said Thangammal ^{measure of an acre} smiling.

"Not at all. It is just a sporting offer, more in his interest than in mine. The best field in the village does not yield more than six percent on its value, whereas my investments fetch me ten per cent and even more, and the securities are excellent."

"Then why do you want to waste good money on a bad investment?"

"Oh, just for the privileges of obliging the great man of the village," said Meenakshi with a leer.

"And incidentally, becoming the landlady of the best field in the village," added Thangammal.

"Well, when I throw away my money, I must have that much consolation. But what is the use of our worrying about his affairs? His lands are already earmarked for the Pillai, and he would rather lose them to a moneyed outsider than to one of his own people. I only hope that Veerappan will not be spoiled by his bad influence."

"Oh, you seem to have a great solicitude for Veerappan," remarked Thangammal.

"Because he is a good man," said Meenakshi.

"I believe you have also lent him some money," said Thangammal rather slyly.

"Yes ; but I am not discussing his credit now—he is quite solvent in spite of the money he owes me and Ranga Reddy. I am only anxious that Venkatachalam should not pull him down along with him when the crash comes. You know he loves his child dearer than his life, and at least for the sake of her, he ought to be persuaded to break away from Venkatachalam."

"I wonder where you get these strange ideas. Do you suggest that Venkatachalam will be so mean as to involve Veerappan also in his debts ? I doubt whether there is a more honourable man in the village. Take it from me that their friendship does not rest on mere rupees, annas, and pies," said Thangammal with some warmth.

"What a mad woman you are!" said Meenakshi, clutching her chin in great surprise. "I never questioned the honesty of Venkatachalam. But, with the best of intentions, we often hurt others along with ourselves, and this is much truer of impulsive people like Venkatachalam who will do anything on the spur of the moment. But you can't escape the effects of foolish acts, however good you may be. We need not go far for examples. Take Appavu of Thumbalam village, the father of

the urchin Venkatachalam is bringing up. I think you remember him?—Well, it seems as if it was yesterday—thirty acres of excellent wet lands, a hundred head of cattle, and a house like a palace—and to-day? he has fled the country in shame, leaving no trace behind him.

It was with the best intention that he persuaded Ponnambalam to invest most of his money in his business and it was with no less honest motives that he speculated in paddy. But the business failed, and failed miserably, ruining both of them."

"It was a tragedy," said Thangammal. "I remember it very well. At least for the sake of his wife, God might have been kinder to Appavu. I have never seen the like of her. She was all kindness and charity. You know Thumbalam is a stage in the journey from Mangalam to Musiri, and nobody could pass through her village without enjoying the hospitality of her house."

"But all her good qualities could not prevail against the foolishness of her husband, and you have no idea of the penalty she had to pay for it," said Meenakshi.

"I have," said Thangammal. "To be suddenly flung from riches into real poverty, to lose her husband alive, and on the top of it all to be in the

family way after having been childless for eighteen years! The shock was enough to stagger anybody; no wonder a tender hearted woman like her went down under the blow. It was most generous on the part of Venkatachalam and his wife, Alamelu, to go to her rescue at that time. I was told that until they gave their pledge that they would adopt the child and bring it up as their own, her struggling spirit wouldn't depart."

"Well, Venkatachalam and Appavu were great friends, and it was the only service he could do to his friend and his wife in this world. Besides, he had no children."

"There! there!! don't you make light of his noble act. I wonder how many people would act as he did in the circumstances," protested Thangammal.

"Well, I don't dispute his good nature," said Meenakshi a little abashed. "But—but—well, I can't get over my prejudice; he is so foolish and vain. What do you think of a man who cannot learn a lesson from the tragedy of his own friend."

"There are some people who will never learn," said Thangammal abstractedly.

"Exactly," said Meenakshi with hearty approval. "And is it not our duty to guard

ourselves from such people, lest they, in their foolishness, should ruin us also? It is for this simple reason that I said that Veerappan should be very careful in his dealings with Venkata-chalam."

Thangammal kept silent for the fraction of a second and was about to say something when Meenakshi interrupted her. "Now you know I have nearly thirty thousand rupees in hard cash, and to whom else am I going to bequeath all that money but to this fellow?" she said, pointing to Mallan, who was seated by her side and who had been patiently listening to their conversation, his pop eyes rolling towards the one or the other, just as the conversation drifted.

The prospect of receiving some important information whetted Thangammal's appetite for gossip, and she encouraged her by applauding her noble resolution.

"And just as this child is the breath of my life, so is Valli to Veerappan. Imagine what would be the splendid possibilities, if the interests of our houses were to become common by the marriage of our children!" said Meenakshi in a pleading voice. Thangammal couldn't help wondering at the audacity of the woman, but as she wanted to get as much fun as possible out of Meenakshi's

aspirations, she said, "It is a grand idea. You with your money and he with his status would lord it over the entire village."

"Oh, do talk seriously, Thangam. I am very earnest," pleaded Meenakshi.

"I too, Meenakshi," asserted Thangammal, suppressing her mirth with great difficulty. "I can't see any objection to the alliance unless—unless that wilful creature, Valli, creates trouble," she said, mentally picturing that lovely girl by the side of Mallan and comparing their features.

"Who is she to create trouble? Can she know what is good or bad for her? And is it left to her to choose her husband?—Was I consulted when I was married? I had never seen my husband before and he was thirty years my senior!" said Meenakshi almost pathetically, her husky tone voicing the irreparable tragedy of her life.

Thangammal could not help feeling sorry for the woman.

"But this is quite different," continued Meenakshi.

"They are well matched in age and circumstances. I know some people will bring in the

question of 'looks'. But I tell you it is absurd to judge a man by his appearance. Beauty of expression is an asset in a woman, but in a man it is a suggestion of effeminacy," she asserted. Thangammal smiled dubiously.

"Now, if *you* want to bring about this match, you can," said Meenakshi.

"I!" said Thangammal in amazement. "I am afraid you are overrating my influence."

"Nothing of the kind. Do you mean to tell me that Lakshmi has no regard for your word? Of course, Veerappan is out of the question. He cannot see anything except through Venkatachalam's eyes. But Lakshmi is a shrewd woman, and if you will only put the idea into her head — mind you, you shouldn't be in a hurry, but just let it germinate and grow slowly — I am sure she will fall in with this proposal. And further," she proceeded, getting into her usual husky whisper, "she is past the age of bearing children and Valli is the only heiress of her property. And if Valli becomes ours what do we gain by insisting on the repayment of our debt?" she hinted.

"Absolutely nothing. It will be just like a mother robbing her own child of its food," said Thangammal humouring her.

“Exactly. But it won’t do if you simply say ‘aye’, ‘aye’ for everything. Somehow you must finish this business. Why don’t you talk to her about it this very night?”

“I will,” promised Thangammal and wondered at her impatience.

It was quite dark by now, and Thangammal went in to light the lamps; whereupon Meenakshi took leave of her.

CHAPTER V

THE POOSAM FESTIVAL

The weekly fair at Veeramangalam happily preceded the Poosam Festival at Musiri by a day. And Venkatachalam and his party could not have wished for more favourable conditions to start on their journey to Kalugupatti and incidentally enjoy the festival at Musiri.

Of the very many bullock bandies that had unloaded their commodities at the fair, more than a dozen had come from Musiri, and as most of them were returning home the same night, the best thing for the party was to avail themselves of the company of such a big caravan.

It meant not merely a safe and comfortable journey for the travellers, but also an easy and unguided exercise for the animals. Therefore, a full hour before the starting time, Grandpa Annamalai, Veerappan, and Madurai had assembled at

Venkatachalam's house, and were waiting for word from the market-place, where Andi, Venkatachalam's farm hand, was stationed to let them know of the start of the caravan.

Madurai offered to drive the cart, but Venkatachalam decided to take along with him Andi, without whom the mettlesome bulls would be difficult to tackle at times. When Andi returned from the shandy (market place) and made ready for the start, Grandpa Annamalai took a lantern and carefully examined the axle nails of both the wheels, to the merriment of the rest.

"You wouldn't laugh if you had had the spill of your lives like me. It is a lesson I can't forget. It is thirty years since I had that accident, and even to-day, I cannot give the least strain to my left shoulder."

"Whose fault was it, Grandpa?" queried Madurai, covertly winking at the rest.

"Oh, it is a long story. I will tell you as we go along. And now lend a hand," he said, trying to get into the bandy.

Madurai and Venkatachalam gently lifted him and pushed him in.

When all had got into the cart, Grandpa Annamalai was fidgetting a little.

"I think there should be more straw," he said, feeling the gunny bags that had been spread all over the straw.

"Oh, there is enough straw, Grandpa. Only it is not evenly spread. You can come here and I will take your place," said Madurai.

Grandpa Annamalai accepted the offer.

"This is quite a cushion," said the old man thankfully.

"And now about your adventure," suggested Madurai.

"Oh, it is such an old thing, but you must know it was a very serious accident. You know that old fellow, Pilloor Kandan, who in his eightieth year took it into his head to improve his digestion by taking some drug from a Malabar pedlar and died of dysentery after three days—"

"Grandpa talks as if he were still young," blurted out Veerappan.

"Well, I *was* at that time," retorted the old man.

"Why, even now, he is only seventy six. Aren't you, Grandpa?" said Madurai.

"No, I am just seventy four."

"Then, there is no comparison at all. You go on, Grandpa," urged Madurai, at the same time slyly pinching Veerappan.

"Well, that old fellow was driving the cart in which were I and several other men. Mind you, fortunately there were no women in it. You see, we were all going to Sappani's marriage at Kandanoor. We were about six families in all, seated in eight bandies, and ours was the last. We had neared the Kandanoor bridge and were about to get down the slope of the embankment, when we heard a hullabaloo behind us. At first we couldn't hear the words; but very soon we found out that the yelling was meant for us, and we could hear distinctly, "you last bandy, your wheel! your wheel!" Now, if Kandan had been a sensible fellow, he should have stopped the bulls and looked to the wheels. Instead of that, the fool leaned his elbow on the back of one of the animals, and that sensitive creature gave a sudden jerk and turned to his right. The left wheel, which had been running without any axle nail at all, got free and fell off. Kandan tumbled down and rolled on to the bed of the stream with absolutely no injuries, whereas I who was seated next to him was thrown out and crushed between the wheel and the shaft. And further, I had to bear the weight of all the

rest in the bandy, who settled on me like bags of ragi. As we were struggling out, with sprains and bruises, the mad fellow was shaking with laughter at our plight."

"He always had something of the comic in him," said Madurai laughing. "But our wheels will never get loose. Did you notice the rings on either side of the axle pins?"

"I did. You are wise, Venkatachalam," commended the old man and prepared to make a comfortable bed for himself.

After an eventless journey, they reached Musiri with the first crow of the cock, and parked their bandy near the choultry on the high embankment of the river. As was to be expected, several hundreds of pilgrims had already come to the river and the bathing ghat was full of noise and bustle, as the bathers dipped in the running water, swabbed and scrubbed their clothes against the stones, and washed and rinsed them—not to speak of the loud invocations and prayers of the multitude. As it was mid-summer, the flow in the river was restricted to a swift stream on the northern side, and the rest of the river, nearly a mile broad, was one vast sandy bed with a few reed bushes here and there to relieve the eye.

A little farther up the river were several thatched pandals (sheds) improvised to house the deities for the day. As the water was nowhere more than two or three feet deep, several had crossed the stream and were seated on the dry sand, deeply engaged in meditation.

Venkatachalam and his party, as they had not yet cleaned their teeth or washed their faces, got down into the river, some distance away from the bathing ghat, so as to avoid annoyance to the pious bathers—though it was some work for them to prevent Grandpa Annamalai from tumbling down the embankment.

As they were keen on keeping free from any kind of pollution till the time of worship, they did not put on fresh clothes after the bath, but with a towel round their loins, began to dry their wet dhoties by holding them out to the wind.

The dawn was slowly breaking and petty traders began to pitch their tents on the sandy plain. Soon the deities also began to arrive one by one in palanquins with all their paraphernalia, preceded by the piper's music. In the course of two hours, the vast sandy bed became one seething mass of devout humanity, which broke cocoanuts and burnt camphor and benzoin as offerings to the gods.

Grandpa Annamalai took his own time to worship every deity, unmindful of the impatience of the others, and by the time he could be persuaded to leave the river, it was nearly ten and was very hot.

"I suppose there is nothing else to see and no more prayers to offer, Grandpa," said Veerappan who was longing for the shelter of some cool shade.

"Really, Veerappa, you shouldn't be so impatient. Why, from the way you are breathing and sweating, anybody would think that you were older than I," retorted the old man.

"Perhaps we all are," said Madurai.

"There is no doubt of it," affirmed the old man. "There are hundreds here who have walked a distance of twenty miles and more and will stay till mid-day worship. After all we won't suffer this inconvenience every day of our lives.—And the festival will be practically over by noon."

"What do you mean? All the fun is in the night," said Madurai.

"I see! and so you are after the fun."

"Oh, no; fun and piety both," corrected Venkatachalam.

"They never go well together," said the old man.

"That is the old and false notion, Grandpa. I don't see any harm in innocent pleasure."

"May be or not. Anyway, I cannot go with you. I am almost blind after dusk," said the old man rather regretfully, at which all laughed. "Well, I shall stay in the bandy and you can all go and make merry. But take care that you don't get into trouble," he winked.

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It was about nine at night. The full moon was in all her glory, and a cool southerly breeze added zest to the enjoyment of the vast gathering that had assembled on the dry bed of the river. For the crowd was now composed not merely of the pious and religious but of pleasure seekers as well.

There were innumerable Bhajanas.* Some of the performers were actuated by sincere piety, while the rest sang for the mere pleasure of it.

The atmosphere reeked with the smell of jack fruits, which were in evidence everywhere and selling very cheap. There were also stalls of sweetmeats, fruit, flowers, toys and other trifles.

* A bhajana is a party of devotees singing in chorus.

And there were lottery booths too where the unwary villagers tried their luck in vain.

Far away from all this noise and bustle, sat several groups of men playing cards with boisterous hilarity. But amidst this gay crowd were sprinkled some knots of men who, in contrast with the rest, seemed to be so deeply absorbed in their game that little or no noise proceeded from them. It was evident that in their case there were greater things at stake than mere amusement. And appropriately enough, they did look a class by themselves—with all the dignity of wealth about them.

Venkatachalam and his party, who were leisurely moving from place to place enjoying the *tamasha* (fun), came to a dead stop on approaching this gathering of card players.

For they all recognised the unforgettable figure of Govindan, though it was nearly twenty years since they had last seen him.

He was a native of Kulattur, one of the neighbouring villages. Time had worked great changes in his appearance, corresponding to his fortune. But all his wealth could not efface the broad cleft in his upper lip.

“He seems to have nothing but diamonds on him,” said Veerappan, scrutinizing all the rings on his fingers and ears.

“From the way in which he is flaunting his silk clothes, one would think that he was swaddled in them,” said Madurai smiling.

“Yet he went to Malaya as a mere cooly,” reminded Veerappan.

“That place must be strewn with riches, if even people like Govindan can succeed so well,” observed Madurai, scarcely concealing his jealousy.

“Kangani business (labour agency) always pays. It is nothing short of slave-dealing. But I do not care how he made his money. I want to know whether I can get some information from him about Appavu. I suppose you remember that they both emigrated to Malaya about the same time,” said Venkatachalam.

The others nodded. The memory of Appavu's sudden disappearance and the commotion it had caused among his creditors once again recurred to their minds. It was a very sad remembrance—saddest for Venkatachalam.

“Has it ever occurred to Velan that you may not be after all his real father?” enquired Madurai.

“I don't think so: we could not love him better, if he were our own. But still the world is full of gossips, and he is growing day by day. Anyway, he has grown to love us so much that the

truth will not hurt him when he learns it.—Why, the play seems to be over,” said Venkatachalam, noticing some of the men getting up.

“Evidently, they have lost all they had with them,” observed Madurai.

Ignoring his remark, Venkatachalam quickly advanced towards Govindan, who was still squatting cross-legged about twenty yards away, and greeted him.

But remembrance came to Govindan rather slowly, and when at last he did recognise Venkatachalam, he offered profuse apologies, complaining of his failing memory and defective eyesight.

Meanwhile, the others had joined them, and with great zest they began to talk of old times and the changes that had come over their rural life.

Govindan, in turn, gave a glorious picture of far-off Malaya, the Fairy Land, where he had made his fortune. Then Venkatachalam casually enquired about Appavu.

“Appavu?—Appavu?—Oh, yes, I remember. That Thumbalam man, isn’t he? Yes; yes; why, he told me that you were one of his best friends and that you were taking care of his only child, who was unborn at the time of his emigration. But I fear he was a failure. Even after I had

become a Kangani, he was drudging as an ordinary cooly. You can't blame anybody for that. He seemed to have no interest in anything. His wife died soon after the child was born—isn't that so?" Venkatachalam nodded assent. "Well, I think that her death, coming on the top of all his troubles, completely broke him."

"But he used to write to me now and then. It is only for the last five years that I have heard nothing from him. I don't even know whether he is dead or alive. We loved each other as brothers, and I would give anything to know that he is happy," said Venkatachalam, unable to conceal his feeling.

"I don't know why he stopped writing to you," said Govindan meditatively. "He left Malaya in strange circumstances. About five years ago, he was working on a plantation which was owned by a rich but irate Dutchman, who used to abuse all his subordinates in very bad language. In one of his angry fits, he used very indecent words to a head-workman, who, whipping out his knife flew at his throat like a wolf. Appavu, who was close by, quickly intervened with the result that he was stabbed in the shoulder while the Dutchman was saved. Appavu was in the hospital for nearly a month, and then got

better. The Dutchman was all kindness to him and promised to provide for him for life, if he would accompany him to Borneo, where he had larger interests. Appavu readily agreed to the offer and left Malaya for what I believed to be prosperity. Since then, all of us who knew him in Penang have lost touch with him."

"How strange are the workings of Fate!" sighed Venkatachalam. "But what I can't understand is his silence. That makes me doubt whether he is alive."

"I don't think so," said Govindan, taking a pinch of snuff from his gold snuff box. "I am sure that the grateful European must have enabled him to live in great comfort. You know easy life always breeds vices, and that is a place where even a saint will go astray. Who knows whether he may have taken a native girl for his wife?" said Govindan, winking.

"I don't think he is that kind of man. But these are days in which anything may happen," said Venkatachalam, and thanking him for his information took leave of him.

His gaiety was marred by what he had heard. The tragedy of his friend seemed to stand before

him as a spectre laughing at the vain doings of man.

His friends did not fail to notice the cloud on his face.

It was growing late. As they had already seen almost everything in the Fair, they suggested returning to the bandy, where the old man was waiting for them, and Venkatachalam readily agreed to their proposal.

CHAPTER VI

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE

There are some people who succeed in all their undertakings, and there are others who fail in everything they attempt to do. And chance, as if to compliment the former on their success and snub the latter for their failure, usually intervenes to the benefit of the first and the detriment of the second. Venkatachalam was undoubtedly of the failing kind. It was true that he was receptive to new ideas and venturesome. But he had not the steadiness and determination to persist in his experiments, so as to reap the fruits of his venture. Instead, with the first sign of failure, he gave up one new line of agriculture for another, and went on changing his schemes so often that he succeeded in nothing, but provided costly lessons for others to profit by.

What he had seen and heard at Kalugupatti spurred him to make the experiment at once in his

own dry lands, of which he had as many as forty acres in one plot.

But he had not the wherewithal to do it. The plan would involve at least two thousand rupees and he had not even two hundred at his command. He had tried all sources which could be tapped for money, but to no purpose. The Pillay, his usual standby in emergencies like this, was away touring in Burma, and his manager was loath to lend more money without consulting him. This meant a delay of two months, even taking it for granted that the Pillay would agree to the loan. By that time, the best sowing season would have passed away, and he would have to wait for another year! In his highly strung condition, such a prospect loomed almost as a catastrophe.

While he was in this uneasy state of mind, Madurai suggested to him that he might approach Meenakshi. Venkatachalam laughed. He could not himself account for his laughter. The idea had never struck him. He had never liked her ways and had nothing but contempt for her—and what was more to the point, had never concealed it from her. But she had always money by her. If there was anybody in the village who could help him to carry out his plans immediately, it

was certainly that woman. But would she do it? — And should he stoop to make the request?

Supposing she refused, could he put up with the insult? He did not know what to do, and he had no faith in Madurai's promise that he would bring about the transaction if he agreed. It was true that Madurai was a clever man, but she was a more clever woman, and might fool him in the end, after having held out hopes.

He thought over the matter for two or three days and decided to take the step. He urged Madurai, however, to broach the subject to her in a very casual and off-hand manner, so that in case of failure his dignity might not be hurt.

Madurai assured him that failure was out of the question, and as for losing his dignity, Meenakshi would feel that she was being honoured.

With all the efforts of his wits, Madurai could not overcome his poverty. He was lean as every one of his family was, but his capacity for eating was astonishing. Nothing was too much for him, and nothing was unpalatable. He was more or less a dependent of Venkatachalam, and was grateful in a way for the small favours he received. So he was really sorry for the straitening circumstances of Venkatachalam. But he

was a shrewd man and understood that, before long, Venkatachalam would cease to be useful to him.

And having earned his living all along by playing second fiddle, he was unfit to do any strenuous work. So it would be very prudent for him to be at peace with all the well-to-do in the village, and particularly with Meenakshi and Mayandi, whose importance was growing day by day. It was true that he had made a fool of Mayandi on many occasions. But since Mayandi was really a fool, there would be no difficulty in winning him over easily.

So he waited for a favourable opportunity to approach them. He learnt that on the next Sunday they were offering worship to their family deity in their cocoanut garden, about a mile and a half from the village. Accordingly, he dropped in on them, just as they were cooking rice for the worship.

"Oh, I see you are offering worship," he said, his face covered with smiles. "I am just returning from Kannipalayam. From the canal bund, I couldn't make out who you were," he added by way of explanation. Meenakshi was pleased with his visit, and his explanation removed much of the surprise she had felt first.

"I am so glad that chance has brought you here," she said in her husky voice. "For a trivial thing like this, one couldn't invite everybody," she said, smiling, and her drooping eyelids drooped down still further, covering almost completely the pupils of her eyes.

"Certainly, certainly," said Madurai. "If you invite one, you will have to invite another, and there will be no end."

"But you shouldn't go away on that account. You must stay with us and partake of the **prasadam*," invited Meenakshi who was eager to gather information from such an intimate associate of Venkatachalam as Madurai. After some excuses, he agreed to stay.

As the milk and rice were still boiling and not yet ready for the worship, they fell to discussing village politics. From one thing to another, Madurai dragged their talk to his recent visit to Kalugupatti and Venkatachalam's proposed experiment.

"Is he not tired of his experiments? Why shouldn't he be content with what he has got?" said Meenakshi in disgust.

**Prasadam* is the food or other gift offered to a God.

"You see there is the Pillay's debt to be cleared."

"Well, that is also his own making. But anyway, this is not the way of clearing it. Why shouldn't he economize and save steadily?"

"Every one can't be so prudent as you," said Madurai smiling.

"I prudent! You talk as if I were an example," said Meenakshi with evident satisfaction. "And how much does he expect to spend for this gram business?"

"Why, he may need at least two thousand rupees."

"Well, there should be no dearth of money for him—with his Pillai to oblige him at a moment's notice."

"He has no idea of asking the Pillai," lied Madurai.

"That is strange. Why not?"

"He seems to have a sort of notion that the Pillai thinks too much of himself, and he was saying that this small amount could be raised from somebody or other in the village."

“From somebody or other in the village!” said Meenakshi with great surprise. “You seem to think that ours is a village of bankers. Why, I can’t think of even two or three who could afford to help Venkatachalam. Did he tell you from whom he means to borrow?”

“Oh, no. It was just talk. He hasn’t decided on anything. Well, if it comes to that, you may also be one of the two or three,” said Madurai.

“I! Are you joking?” said Meenakshi who was trying to see through the game.

“Honestly, I don’t see any joke at all. You have never done him harm nor has he you, and I believe he is still solvent enough for another loan of two thousand.”

“Oh, I am not at all questioning his solvency,” protested Meenakshi. “But he would be too proud to have any transaction with me.”

Madurai laughed.

“Did he tell you that?”

“There are things which need no telling,” muttered Meenakshi.

“I tell you there is not a more misunderstood man than that fellow. But he has to thank his tongue for it.”

“Ah, there you are! His tongue is not only sharp but venomous,” hissed Meenakshi huskily.

“But I tell you he is not so bad as you judge him. He is too much of a simpleton to think of anything for long; or else do you think he would go on fooling with his money like this?” said Madurai rather hypocritically.

“That is true,” admitted Meenakshi.

“Now, what do you say?—For a wager, I will make him borrow from you,” said Madurai.

“Oh, I am not anxious to lend to him.”

“Nor is he anxious to borrow from you. In fact, he has no idea of it at all. I only want to convince you that he has no ill will towards you or anybody else for that matter. But, seriously, I wish, in the interests of the village, that he would not go to the Pillai any more and that all his liabilities were transferred from him to some one in the village. And, between ourselves,” he continued almost in a whisper, “you may be sure that I have something to do with turning his mind against the Pillai.”

Meenakshi was intrigued and wanted to know the reason.

“Meenakshi, you are a shrewd woman. Tell me honestly, how long can he go on with his mad schemes?” he asked. Meenakshi’s entire being glowed with the warmth of his appreciation, and she sat mute in an ecstasy of self-complacency.

Madurai was not an ungrateful man, and he felt some compunction for talking in this strain, but he consoled himself that he was only playing a part.

“Now we all belong to one community,” he went on “and if we begin to think about it, there must be some sort of link among all the families in the village. I would rather that one of us took possession of his properties than an outsider. I didn’t want to say that, but you have forced me to say it.”

“There is no harm in speaking the truth, and I assure you that I have always been of that opinion. But I didn’t know, till now, that you were such a thoughtful man,” she complimented, her fat face wreathed in smiles.

“Not a word of this to anybody, and least of all to Venkatachalam. And, especially, you must be careful, Mayandi,” he said turning to him.

“You are right,” agreed Meenakshi, casting a contemptuous look at Mayandi, who winced under the look and promised faithful obedience.

“I suppose you see now why I want you to lend him the money.”

“What a fool you are, Madurai! Do you expect me to go to him with bent knees and offer the money?” said Meenakshi.

“Well, you are not so wise as you pretend to be,” said Madurai a little reproachfully. “Did I advise you to do that? It is up to the man who feels the pinch to seek the remedy. Don’t forget that it is he who is seeking a favour from you. I shall suggest the idea to him and if he does not care to go to you, he does not deserve any consideration,” he said with great warmth. Just then Thevanai, Mayandi’s wife, announced that everything was ready for the worship, which in this case consisted simply of the offering of sweet rice, cocoanuts and plantains to the deity.

The worship over, Madurai partook of the repast, and preferred to leave the place before the others for reasons which he explained in a whisper to Meenakshi.

All the way from the cocoanut garden to the house, Meenakshi was silent and thoughtful. But

her thoughts must have been very agreeable, as broad smiles now and then spread over her ample face.

The worship was already beginning to be fruitful, and she promised a grander one to the deity, if he would fulfil her heart's desire.

And though no sound escaped her lips, one could see their movement to the tune of her repeated thought 'the first step,' 'the first step'.

CHAPTER VII

THE LAST STRAW

Within a fortnight of Madurai's interview with Meenakshi at the latter's cocoanut garden, Venkatachalam had taken from her not only a loan of two thousand rupees, which he at first desired, but also an extra thousand for unforeseen expenses.

With plenty of cash on hand, he set about his work in right earnest. As there were signs of the early setting in of the monsoon, he employed a greater number of hands to finish the sowing as quickly as possible. That year, for some unaccountable reason, *chulam* (a sort of maize) seemed to have caught the imagination of the farmers, and it was the universal dry crop of the season.

So, in the entire dry land area of the village, Venkatachalam's gram crop was the one solitary patch of green and weed-like vegetation, hemmed

in on all sides by acres and acres of tall and cane-like stalks of *cholam*.

Venkatachalam was glad that it was so. He argued that it shut out from public view his precious experiment and effectively warded off evil eyes.

If one believes in evil eyes, he had every reason to fear them. For, the crops were growing up wonderfully, thanks to the timely monsoon, which Providence seemed to regulate so as to suit their need.

In fact, the season promised to be an unprecedented success and the farmers hoped to reap a bumper harvest.

Venkatachalam was watching with growing elation the progress of his cultivation. Only a month more—and he would reap the fruits of his first successful experiment. He had succeeded after all and the success was certainly beyond his wildest dream. It was doubtful who was more overjoyed with the success, Venkatachalam or Grandpa Annamalai. For the old man considered it as his own personal triumph and never failed to accompany Venkatachalam whenever he visited the plantation.

One afternoon Venkatachalam took to his gram field not only Grandpa Annamalai but all his other friends as well, in order to fix the date of the harvest, which in his opinion was not to be delayed even for a week. Accordingly, they scattered themselves all over the vast field, each pulling up a pod here and there and examining the gram—not without munching the green and sweet seeds.

When they were employed in this pleasant occupation, they heard some angry shouts in the neighbouring cholam field. At first they could not make out anything, but the voices soon became articulate and more and more vehement. Two of the villagers, Perumal and Chinnappan, seemed to be engaged in a wordy warfare, and from the pitch of their voices, and the obscene epithets they were hurling at each other, it was certain that they would come to blows very soon.

Madurai, who was nearest to them, bawled out to them to desist and tried to reach them through the cholam field. But the stalks which were taller than a man's height, grew so close together that he found it impossible to make his way through them. Meanwhile, the others were running along the circuitous ridge, the only possible access to Chinnappan's field, and Madurai

followed them. But before they could get there, Perumal and Chinnappan had closed with each other. Each had caught hold of the other's tuft and was pommelling with the other hand. It was with very great difficulty that Venkatachalam and his friends could separate the combatants. The pleadings of Grandpa Annamalai who came last, had a little effect. But Chinnappan who had the worst of the fight was unappeasable. His nose was bleeding and one eyelid was terribly swollen. With alternating threat and advice, Perumal was persuaded to leave the place. But Chinnappan was inconsolable, and he had good reason to be. He had not only lost his property, but had been beaten into the bargain.

According to him, thefts of cholam had been going on in his field for some time past, and he had reason to suspect that Perumal's son must have something to do with them. So he had merely asked that dishonourable outcast, Perumal, to restrain his son, whereupon he had begun to revile and abuse him, as only a low caste beggar would. But Chinnappan wouldn't take this lying down and he returned the abuses with tenfold vehemence—which resulted in the scuffle.

Now Perumal was not much known for his honesty, and his son gave every promise of

outdoing his father. Such being the case, Venkatachalam and his friends easily understood the truth of the situation, and pacified Chinnappan by promising to settle the matter in their Panchayat.

The next morning Venkatachalam and Grandpa Annamalai were squatting on their heels, near the Big Channel of the village, and leisurely cleaning their teeth with margosa twigs.

It was very early—an hour or so before sunrise. There were many others similarly occupied, since it was the habit of most of the male inhabitants of the village to resort to the Big Channel for their morning ablutions. The conduct of Perumal during the previous evening came in for a lot of criticism, and there seemed to be very few who sympathized with him. Just then, one of Venkatachalam's servants, who was working on his Bengal gram plantation, came running towards him in great excitement, and cried in despair, wringing his hands, "Master! we are ruined! the whole village is ruined!" He was greatly upset, and by this outburst gathered round him all those present.

Venkatachalam was puzzled. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. "Won't you say what the matter is?" he asked in great anxiety and anger.

"With the rise of Velli (Venus) I started for our gram plantation," continued the man with great effort, "As I came near the banyan tree of the Pedari temple, I could feel in the air a sweet smell, as if corn was being roasted. Before I reached the Strangler's Pit, the air grew hot.

Suddenly I remembered the great fire of Thumbalam village, and ran towards our gram plantation. But I couldn't go beyond the palmyra trees. It was getting clearer now and I could see clouds of smoke trailing eastward.

A pack of hares were running helter-skelter, and one frightened jackal dashed against my knee and galloped past, scaring me almost out of my wits. Oh, master! all the crops are now a burnt waste. I couldn't bear the sight—I simply couldn't!" wailed the stricken man.

"Can't we do anything now?" asked one man.

"What can we do? Fighting the fire is out of the question. We can only watch our misery," said another in a tone of resignation.

"We shall know what to do when we get there. Let us not be discussing here," said a third impatiently and darted forward, followed by most of those present.

But Venkatachalam did not budge an inch. He sat still, gazing into the distance. Something told him that he had lost the fight. He was up against something that was above the human. To be struck by lightning while on the threshold of victory! Did he deserve it? But who was he to judge.

Still, still, he felt it was most unkind of God to have punished him like that.

Grandpa Annamalai watched his face in great misery, and kept discreetly silent. He knew that consolation would only rankle in the wound.

“Well, Grandpa, I will get ready the cart, and let us also have a look at the fun. When everybody dies, there will be nobody to mourn— isn’t it?” Venkatachalam said at last, vainly assuming light-heartedness. He *knew* beyond doubt that the fire had provided the last straw for his back.

CHAPTER VIII

TRANSITION

The year following was a period of comparative idleness to Venkatachalam. A long and severe attack of fever had not only confined him to his bed for nearly two months, but also brought in a fresh complication in the shape of rheumatism in his left leg.

What with this complaint, the prolonged treatment it involved, and his reluctance to meet friends, he scarcely went out of house—even to the pial. Grandpa Annamalai and Veerappan were the only regular visitors.

Madurai also called on him now and then, prefacing his visits with a sort of apology that one had to attend to the business of running a family.

Venkatachalam sympathized with him, and assured him that though he could not be so useful

to him as before, he would certainly allow him his usual gift of paddy at the time of harvest. He knew that Madurai was spending much of his time at Meenakshi's house and he was not resentful of it. On the other hand, he was glad that it was so, since Madurai would have frequent opportunities of serving his interests—which he knew were now intimately connected with Meenakshi's good favour.

It was not a bad year so far as the harvest of his wet lands was concerned. Besides the annual provision for the requirements of his household, it left him a fair surplus. But he had reckoned without his indebtedness to the Pillai whom he had completely forgotten. For nearly a year, he had heard nothing from either the Pillai or his agent, because of the serious disturbances in Burma, where the Pillai had stayed for months and gathered round him all his capable assistants to stem the tide of disaster. But it was useless, since his interests were scattered throughout that country.

The disorders assumed the form of an organised rebellion, and the loss of life and property was incalculable.

And when the Pillai returned to India, with all his people, he was almost a ruined man, and

his only consolation was that he had returned to his native land without a scratch on his person. Now the only hope of rallying his fortunes was to see to the security of his investments in India.

And so, one hot afternoon, the Pillai and his agent arrived at Venkatachalam's house, panting and perspiring.

Venkatachalam was taken aback. He welcomed them with profuse apologies and was at very great pains to please them by his hospitality. But the Pillai cut short his attentions by reminding him that he had come on business and not to enjoy his hospitality. In the course of the conversation, he made Venkatachalam understand that he was not unaware of his further commitment with Meenakshi. Venkatachalam nervously explained to him the circumstances which had led him to seek her help, and promised to pay all the interest due to him. He had the shock of his life when the Pillai informed him that he had not come to receive the mere interest but the principal as well. Venkatachalam by turns protested, appealed and even cringed for sufficient time. But the Pillai was obdurate. He was not going to take any more risks. He was afraid that his loan was not adequately secured.

But since Venkatachalam pleaded so much, he would allow him a months' time, no more. If he did not pay up by the end of a month, he might be sure that the money would be received only through the court.

Venkatachalam was at his wit's end. He was convinced that the Pillai meant business, and would carry out of his threat. The consequences of his failure to satisfy him were simply unthinkable. The best field in the village, his Snail Farm, would be the first to be taken. Was there any one in the village who did not covet its possession? And if it were to come up for auction by the court—oh, he shuddered at the very idea. The perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. His throat went dry, and in his agony, he paced up and down the inner verandah of his house. Oh, Snail Farm! Snail Farm! the pride of his family for generations, was it to be parted with in his lifetime? Oh, he would rather die than allow such a thing! He was yet to see the man who would take it from him! He grit his teeth and clenched his fists. But his anger lasted only a few seconds and the hard reality of the situation asserted itself. He realized that giving vent to his feelings would carry him nowhere. It only impeded his clear thinking.

Madurai had been his adviser in many affairs, but now he was not easily available, for Venkatachalam could not treat him so kindly as before. He thought it was very mean of Madurai to have forsaken him so completely ; but the next moment his charitable disposition asserted itself, and he argued—what else could the poor man do in the circumstances ?

He racked his brains for some way out of the painful situation, which his unpractical mind had never pictured to him before.

He was growing hot, his head was aching, and his perplexed and agitated mind refused to keep calm. He was sure he would go mad unless he opened his heart to some friend and sought his advice. So he cried out for Velan. But Velan, as usual, was not at home, and he was answered by his wife.

Alamelu had heard from the other side of the house, the heated talk between her husband and the Pillai. The presence of his wife only made him still more miserable. She was so good and trustful that he felt like a criminal if, by any act of his, he were to make her unhappy.

Alamelu was a simple and pious woman whose time was divided between her household duties and

prayers to the gods. She had never interfered with her husband in his management of the family affairs.

But at the same time she was not blind to the fast changing fortunes of the family, and it was her constant prayer that God should help them to tide over their difficulties, more for his sake than for her own. Particularly to-day, she was much troubled by the look of extreme misery depicted on his face. It was so unlike him. Husband and wife stared at each other for the space of a few seconds. Each knew the other's thoughts, and Alamelu relieved Venkatachalam's embarrassment by beginning the talk.

"Velan won't be returning before sunset. I have sent him to Marudur to fetch oil cake from Nallammal's house. Is there anything particular?" she enquired softly.

"Nothing, dear; I wanted to send him to Madurai's house. You know the Pillai has been here to-day.—Well, he has issued a threat to me."

"What can the fellow do? At the worst, he can only take back his money," he said.

"That is more easily said than done," said Venkatachalam, smiling in spite of his misery.

“ I shall be going to Lakshmi’s house in a few minutes, and if I meet him on the way at Meenakshi’s place, I shall ask him to come to you at once.—You know he now mostly stays at Meenakshi’s house? ”

“ Yes;—I don’t think Veerappan will be at home now. But leave word with Lakshmi that I want to see him on a matter of urgent importance.”

Alamelu nodded assent and left him.

That night Venkatachalam, Veerappan, and Madurai were closeted together till a very late hour. The earnestness of their talk often expressed itself in loud exclamations and vehement outbursts. Alamelu knew nothing of it beyond that it was in some way connected with their indebtedness to the Pillai. And she did not care to know more.

She was one of the simplest of women, to whom her husband was a sort of demigod. Obedience and faithfulness to him were religious duties with her, and she had a deep rooted conviction that the salvation of her soul depended on the loyal discharge of these duties. She had heard it said on good authority—perhaps it was in the blood of her race—that a woman cannot have a personality of her own, except through her

husband, and the one mission of her life was to be the loyal servant of her lord. She had been taught and convinced that to the extent to which this mission was fulfilled was her happiness after death assured.

With ideas like these it was not strange that Alamelu cared little what happened to her husband's properties. She was insensible to pain or pleasure, misery or happiness. In a word, she did not live in the present but prepared for the life after death.

The next week was a busy one for Madurai. His frequent visits to Venkatachalam's and Meenakshi's houses provoked much thought and talk among the villagers. Most of them sincerely sympathized with Venkatachalam in his distress.

But, poor fellows, they could do nothing more than sympathize. By and by, it leaked out that Meenakshi had advanced to him sufficient money to clear all his debts, and at the same time had taken possession of all his wet lands on a possession-mortgage contract, according to which Venkatachalam or his heirs were to forfeit all claim to the property, if the mortgage was not released within sixty years.

Some people thought that it was foolish of him to have done like that, while others defended his action, since thereby he had saved his lands from immediate auction. But all agreed that his dependence on the precarious and doubtful returns of dry lands—however large in area—was sure to be fraught with serious disappointment.

It was quite possible for him to sell some of his property and yet retain enough to enable him to live decently. But to him it was out of the question. Like Micawber, he still hoped for something to turn up, and he would rather live and die with the knowledge that the lands were still his, though not in his enjoyment, than part with them for any consideration. That was Venkatachalam all over and everybody knew that.

CHAPTER IX

HUMILIATION

It is tragic that the pangs of dispossession should be more intense than the thirst for possession. With a sinking heart, and misery that was beyond description, Venkatachalam watched the process of his divestment, since he could no longer count on the certainty of the produce from wet lands.

First it was the servants who took leave of him with tears in their eyes to earn their living elsewhere; then all the cattle went, except a pair of bulls and a milch cow, and with them the huge hayrick too. The big mound of manure followed. —What wet lands was he going to cultivate any more?

Rumour had it that many other things also were disposed of under the agency of Madurai, even without the cognizance of Venkatachalam, with a view to saving him unnecessary misery.

His persistent illness assumed the definite form of paralysis, which, besides disabling his body, also wrecked his mind. For nearly six months he had been bed-ridden, and though his mind managed to recover from the shock, his body refused to move. Without help it was impossible for him even to get up from his recumbent posture. At times the thought crossed his mind that he might have to pass the rest of his life as a cripple. But incorrigible optimist that he was, he hoped that some day his health as well as his fortune would come round. Meanwhile, it was his duty to put up with everything in a spirit of calm resignation.

A year passed and the new order of life at Venkatachalam's had already lost most of its newness. Everything looked so natural and matter of fact, that he and his wife doubted whether they had known any other life than the present one.

Venkatachalam always lay on his back in his cell of a room, staring at the thatched roof above him, muttering to himself, and occasionally munching roasted peas—the only luxury that he could command now. There was nothing in this impoverished cripple to suggest even remotely that he had once been the dashing swell of the village.

A man so fond of society had now only solitude for companionship. Few people took the trouble to call on him, and even the visits of Madurai and Veerappan were becoming rare. And Grandpa Annamalai definitely dropped out owing to a fast-developing cataract in his eyes, which made him blind.

But time and tide wait for no man. Another year passed and one more. And nothing turned up to rehabilitate Venkatachalam's affairs. The only change in his fortune was a fresh debt of five hundred rupees, since in one year the dry crop was a failure and in another, the price had gone so low that its value was quite inadequate to keep him in comfort.

Velan was sixteen now, and under the guidance of Venkatachalam he had to look after the affairs of the family.

Of course, there was not much to look after, but the problem of making both ends meet grew more complicated as time went on. He was growing older and wiser. To one who had never known what difficulty was, the bitter reality of hardship came with a stunning surprise. But he did not flinch. He rose to the occasion, and the hard knocks of life did not depress him. Instead,

they gave him a strange experience, and strengthened his determination to devote his life to the service of his foster parents.

In his struggles, he scarcely knew how time passed on. Soon he was passing eighteen, almost a man, with set lips and grim determination on his face.

He had long ago found out his true relationship to Venkatachalam and Alamelu, but still he addressed them as his 'Pa' and 'Ma'. He admired them for their nobility and came to the conclusion that his life would be a waste if he failed to restore the fortunes of his family. With an innate generosity and a feeling of gratitude that knew no bounds, he was ready to give his very life to gain this end. But what was his life worth? Should he follow the footsteps of his father—? He had heard so many stories of him. If he could only find out his whereabouts!

But surely some Kangani would be willing to take him on special terms, say ten years' wages in advance. In spite of his troubles, he was growing stronger every day, and he had no doubt that he would prove one of the most useful labourers. He was sure that the Kangani who enlisted him would never regret his choice. But—but how

would his 'parents' take it? The thought made him sad. They had grown to love him so dearly, nay, dearer than their own lives, and he shuddered at the consequences of parting. It might even kill them. Oh, Lord! what was he to do? And then there was Valli. The thought of her thrilled his entire being. He had not known till recently how lovely—and affectionate too—she was. She also *knew* that his affection for her was no less. But of late, something stronger and deeper than affection stirred him whenever he met her, and made him look awkward in her presence. He was conscious that Valli was not altogether free from a similar embarrassment, and he simply couldn't think of separating from her.

Valli was nearly sixteen now, the age at which the girls of his community generally married. He vaguely remembered many things said about him and her when they were very young.

But that seemed long, long ago. And yet he knew that it was only four or five years ago. What a change had come over him during that period! Further thinking made him almost mad. The memory of the past and the reality of the present convulsed his mind.

He had heard of large cities where fabulously rich men lived. A kind gesture of one such man would save the situation of his 'father'. After all what he wanted was not a donation or charity. It was just a loan. When he became a man, he would certainly repay it. If anybody doubted him, let him tear open his heart and see! But how to get at one of these fellows? Problems of this kind, all directed towards the one purpose of salvaging the wrecked family, so much agitated his mind that he began to live in an atmosphere of unreality.

His visits to Valli's house were not so frequent as before.—What had he to take to her? Though the circumstances of her father were not very enviable, decidedly they were better than those at home. But he was quite sure that this made no difference in Valli's attitude towards him—though the same could not be said of her mother, Lakshmi.

He could sense a change in Lakshmi's behaviour towards him. It is true she pretended to be as friendly as ever, but he did not fail to notice that she preferred to avoid him as much as possible. On the other hand, Valli appeared to be at great pains to please him and his parents. She did not mind his staying away from her house.

As if to make up for it, she came oftener to his house on some pretext or other. Little was spoken at these meetings, but much was felt. It was so unlike them to feel shy of each other—perhaps it was because the feelings were so new and strange to them.

While Lakshmi never cared to step into his house, he was grieved to find his mother often visiting her. He even brought to her notice Lakshmi's studied indifference. But Alamelu was a simple woman, and she saw nothing untoward in Lakshmi's conduct. She was so foolish as to question Lakshmi herself about this, and appeared to be quite satisfied with her explanation that heavy work kept her at home!

One evening Velan was rambling in the thick wood on the river bank. He was looking for a herb to treat the injured eye of his cow.

The place was full of bushes and jujube trees, and the ground was strewn with their shining red fruit. Velan was tempted to pick and taste it. Some was sour but some was deliciously sweet. While he was eating a sweet fruit, he heard some voices from a bush close by. He quickly recognized them. There were three of them. One was

Mallan's; the other two were those of Mari and Munian, fellows who dogged the footsteps of those who threw them some crumbs! Their low voices and obscene jokes convinced him that they were doing something shady. He was intrigued. He noiselessly crawled into a bush so as to be safe from all observation and listened. Through a slight clearing in the foliage, not bigger than a key hole, he could also see Mallan's face. So they were on a carouse! Mallan had many vices, but it was a surprise to Velan that he had also taken to drinking stealthily. They had finished their business, and were flinging away the empty earthen mugs, and it was a mercy that one of them missed him by a few inches. Mallan was in very good spirits. His bantering tone seemed to be so ill fitted to his contemptible physique. From one thing to another, the topic drifted to Mallan's marriage.

Munian expressed his doubt whether Mallan could marry, while his eldest brother, Cholan, remained unmarried.

"They say it is against the custom. But if Cholan gives you permission, there will be no objection," said Munian. ↴

"Ah, who is *he* to give me permission? He is a loafing pariah dog and it is years since we disowned him. He dare not even pass by our house. Even if he mended his ways, the utmost he could expect of us is feeding and clothing. Aunt and father have already decided it and they know best," said Mallan.

Munian nodded his head approvingly.

"Any way, you are the luckiest fellow to marry the loveliest girl in the village," remarked Mari ingratiatingly.

"Ah, who is she?" queried Munian.

"What, haven't you told Munian yet?" asked Mari in great surprise, turning to Mallan.

A broad smile spread over Mallan's small face. The pop eyes seemed to grow very big and the swollen head, to swell still further with elation.

"I thought he would know. Now, let me test your cleverness, Muniya. Who is the loveliest girl in the village?" he demanded straightening his neck with an air of ineffable pride—which had the ridiculous effect of exposing his thin and slender neck to his great disadvantage. Muniyan

was a cunning fellow. Mallan's funny appearance did not fail to tickle him, but he cleverly diverted his mirth by laughing at his question.

"As if I did not know! But I have a sort of doubt that she is intended for another."

"Whom do you mean?"

"I mean Velan—and Valli."

"Ah, she is Valli. But who is Velan to dare to marry her? A pauper, and a pauper's son! Why, I heard her mother saying to my aunt the other day, that she would rather drown Valli in a well than allow her marriage with that fellow. You know we have taken over all their lands and they haven't got a grain to live on. In a few months, you will see him begging for his food."

Velan bit his lip till the blood almost gushed out. But with great self restraint, he lay quiet, glued to the spot.

"His true father was a beggar and the son also must be one," said Mari.

"Even his foster-father is one now. They say he will die in a few months," said Muniyan.

"Whether he lives or dies, Velan will have to beg for his living soon," said Mari.

“As if he were not already doing it! Take it from me that for the last six months he and his parents have been living on doles from my mother-in-law.—Why do you laugh, Muniya? I assure you Valli is as good as my wedded wife.”

“You are a big man, and is there anything which you cannot do?” said Muniyan apologetically.

“But is that cripple aware of it? He is too proud a fellow,” said Mari.

“Oh, he knows nothing. For the matter of that, even that idiot Velan does not know—though any man, with a little brain, would try to find out from where he gets his meal every day, when there are no provisions in the house. You see, one day I happened to overhear my mother-in-law and aunt talking at home. But for that, I too would know nothing of their utter poverty. My mother-in-law is a shrewd woman. She wants to keep Velan’s mother at a distance. She never goes to her house now, but she gives every kind of help. She wants to bring home to Alamelu her ‘degradation’. Yes, that is the very word she used. And do you know how she manages to send provisions?—The thing is done through Valli. Valli just takes a brass pot, fills it with whatever is intended for Velan’s

house, and under pretext of calling on Alamelu on her way to the river, empties the provisions in their house and goes away. This arrangement is known only to Velan's mother, my wife, and my mother-in-law. Isn't it capital?"

"Oh, you are 'wifing' Valli already!" said Muniyan.

"Why not? why not? She is my sweetheart," he crooned ecstatically.

Velan wished that the Kaveri would suddenly swell in a huge flood and destroy the entire village. That alone would stop the further publicity of their humiliation.

That pop-eyed puny ass was quite justified in calling him a fool. Not to have known how he was being fed without food in the house! And his mother! could there be a more stupid woman, without any sense of self-respect? But she *was not* his mother. He was glad he was not born of her. She had only mothered him. And then he suddenly stopped—was it fair to blame that simple creature who was too good for this world?—His father to live on the doles of a scheming and time-serving woman! Oh, the humiliation was beyond bearing! His father would go mad if he were to know it. Latterly his health had been failing fast

and his mental powers also seemed to be deteriorating. Ah, how he wished he might grow insane, so that he might never know the extent of his misery!

God had been most unkind to him. Could he not be a little merciful by hastening his death? As if by inspiration, he suddenly clasped his hands and silently prayed for the quick demise of his father! At other times, the strangeness of his act would not have failed to impress him, but just then, that seemed to him the only service he could render to him as a return for all his love and affection.

He was getting restless, and if Mallan and his friends had not left the place very soon, he would certainly have betrayed his presence.

And then, that venomous serpent Valli! There again, he was fooled and fooled for the hundredth time. If she courted riches, wealth, and ornaments, she should go her way and let him alone. Why all these pretences?

Pretences? No, it was a deliberate conspiracy on her and her mother's part to insult him, to humiliate him, to make vivid to him his own 'degradation'. Ah, what had he done to deserve such cruelty! He was overpowered by self-pity.

But the next moment he flared up. He raged and threatened to hack that wench and her mother to pieces. They did not know with whom they were playing; he would let them know, and very soon.

He clenched his fists and grit his teeth. He was like a tiger mortally wounded that will not acknowledge defeat yet cannot fight for its life.

CHAPTER X

THE PAIN OF LOVE.

That night Velan retired to bed early without his supper on the plea of illness. And he was really ill. Sleep was impossible to him, and he kept on rolling from side to side on his old rickety coir cot. He was tortured by thoughts and feelings whose implications he was himself at a loss to understand. But amidst all the confused issues, one thing stood out prominent—that if he had to retain what little self-respect was left to him, he must earn his living and that of his parents. But had he any self-respect? Those horrible and unscrupulous women had stabbed him in the dark. And should they escape scot-free? His blood began to boil and in a frenzy, he fancied chopping off their heads with his billhook—and then his father's, his mother's and his own to complete the picture! His pillow was soaked with perspiration. He got up from his cot and wiped off the sweat. It was midnight and the entire village was in peaceful

repose. He restlessly paced up and down the open courtyard.

The barking of dogs at one corner of the street jarred on his troubled mind, and then there came the howl of a jackal somewhere near the burial ground. It was taken up by another, and yet another, till it seemed that the entire race of jackals, from one end of the earth to the other, were howling in one voice. The noise was nothing unusual to him, but just now, coming as it did from the burial ground, it seemed to convey to him a hundred sinister meanings.

Velan was an unlettered boy, but the experience of the last four or five years had crammed into his head strange thoughts and stranger feelings that at once inspired and harrowed his soul. The thought of the burial ground revived memories of many dear and loved ones who had found their eternal rest there. There was Ayyakkannu, the boldest fighter of the village, whom nothing would daunt, but whom cholera laid low in a few hours. And then there was Nachiappan, the most jovial of fellows, to be in whose company was to roar with laughter—and oh, there were so many! What had become of them all? The burial ground seemed to mock at human aspirations. And yet, life was so full of

fun and joy—and at the same time, was it not full of misery? Oh, if he could only come across a treasure-trove whereby he could solve his father's difficulties! There were stories of such finds, and why shouldn't one come his way?

He had heard that devils generally guarded these hidden treasures and wanted a price for their delivery. He would most cheerfully offer his very life to one who would oblige him with his charge.

But how to get at one?—He checked his thoughts. Was he going mad? He heaved a deep sigh, and shook his head violently, as if to set his brain in order once again. But his concern for his stricken father and mother was overpowering. It returned to the attack again and again and goaded his brain to violent efforts. The train of thought brought him to his real father's stay—or was it death?—in foreign lands. So many who emigrated to foreign lands had returned with riches! Why should not his father also have done like that? He tried to imagine what would be the glad effects of such a union. His "Papa", "Mamma", and his father and himself once again in the full possession of all their lands, and with plenty of money to spend just as they liked! And then nobody would dare to covet Valli. He again shook his head violently. Something seemed to

warn him that his brain was going the wrong way. He to marry Valli! That base, shameless wench who was so heartless as to mock at his misery. A thought crossed his mind that her mother and not she was to blame. But he could see no excuse for her. A woman—yes, she was sixteen and some girls of her age had even become mothers.

He would turn the tables on her. He would jilt her, but not without letting her know first of her own limitations. It was fortunate that God had given him an opportunity to see that woman in her true colours. Fortunate? Was he crazy? To understand the nature of a vile wretch, should his father and mother have been brought so low? Oh, it was all foolishness. Punish that woman he must. But he should not be in a hurry. There was nothing like calm deliberation. He must think of some revenge which would make her remember for life. Meanwhile, he should even pretend to be friendly with her. But the first thing he must do on the morrow was to search for some wages. He suddenly remembered that channel clearing was going on at Manamedu, about five miles from his village.

Hundreds of labourers were employed every day to remove the silt and mire, and he had no

doubt of getting work. In the beginning, nobody would even know that he was working as a daily labourer. He would certainly take his mother into his confidence and if she objected, would bring home to her, how, by her stupidity, she had wronged her husband. But his father should in no circumstances come to know of his doings. He would see that mother kept perfect silence, and there was no fear of anybody else informing him. Yet, it would be wiser to guard against being seen by anybody.

While Velan was being consumed by thoughts like these, the approach of dawn was heralded by a few wary cocks whose shrill and long crowing prompted many an early riser to prepare himself for the day's labour. Velan felt tired. His intense mental efforts had brought physical exhaustion. He was hesitating whether to take to bed, or while away the hour or so before the dawn, when a sudden drizzle decided his choice. In the thatched verandah, his cot was half exposed to the open. He quickly shoved it inside and closer to the wall so as to be absolutely safe from rain. The drizzling stopped after a few minutes, but the air had become very cool and coaxed him to lie down; and in the twinkling of an eye, he was fast asleep.

It was broad daylight, and still Velan showed no signs of waking. The shrill voice of the curd-woman wending in the street as well as the noise of his mother's movements in the house only faintly impinged on his consciousness, and he would have slept on for another hour, if the loud report of a metallic vessel, heavily thrown against the ground, had not violently disturbed his slumber. He woke up with a start, and, arranging his dhoti, looked wildly about him.

There, a few yards away from him, was Valli on all fours, and by her side was a brass pot upside down, from which rice was spilling. The incidents of the previous evening flashed before him like lightning, and he took in the situation at once. Fate seemed to give proofs—if proofs were needed—of Valli's rascality. His ire rose and he wanted to thrash her on the spot. But she was slow in rising to her feet. Was she hurt? With set lips and an ill-concealed scowl on his face, he advanced towards her. "Are you hurt?" he demanded, with little sympathy in the voice.

Valli was all in a tremor and she dubiously nodded her head. Then with unsteady hands,

she collected the rice and was putting it back into the pot again, when Velan again curtly spoke to her. "I want to have a talk with you alone. So meet me in the cattle shed when you go home."

Valli again shook her head. But it was evident she was suffering intensely. Her eyes were full of unshed tears and her lips of unheaved sobs; Valli went in and returned within a minute without the brass pot. She looked more composed, but it was unmistakable that she had given her eyes a vigorous rubbing.

"Auntie has gone to the channel. It may be some time before she returns. And what is it you want to talk about?" she asked.

Without replying to her, Velan bolted the street door and led her to an unused and ill kept room in the house which was once used as a granary.

When they were within and secure from being overheard, Velan demanded, "How long have you been playing this game?"

"What game?" queried Valli, with no less spirit.

“That of patronizing us in our distress—of bringing home to us our own degradation, so that we may give up the idea of an alliance with your family—as if I were looking to marriage to end all our troubles or you were the only girl in the world to aspire to,” he said sneeringly.

“Whoever said that? Oh, you and your meanness! Do you know that my mother would rather commit suicide than allow you to marry me?” she retorted.

“Quite true. So why should you humiliate us in this manner? Are we going to protest if you are to be married to Mallan? My father is practically dead, and my mother is a born fool, and I assure you I will not so much as raise my little finger.

I am at my wit's end to understand why you should torment us like this. To-day, we have come to this state, but remember we have had a past of which anybody can be proud. And surely, I have done nothing to you, Valli, that you should be a party to this!” he said in a voice that had suddenly toned down and betrayed a sense of injury that seemed to be beyond his bearing. Valli stood mute for a while. Speech seemed impossible

to her just then, and with great effort, she managed to ask, "Who told you these things?"

"Mallan himself. There again, you must excuse me, I was compelled to listen to him. Yesterday evening, I was looking for a herb in the wood on the river bank, and the talk of Mallan, Munian, and Mari, who were drinking in the bushes close by, reached my ears. Would to God I had never heard it!" he said suddenly plunging into a fury. "It needed all my strength of will to refrain from throttling that pop-eyed scoundrel on the spot. He was praising the cleverness of your wonderful mother, that barrel of a woman, his aunt,—and you too, who had planned to bring home to us our poverty, so that we might not consider ourselves your equals, and much less hope for a marriage alliance with you! And you, you devil who have been dolling rice to my mother, do you pretend to know nothing?"

Look here! the past is past. I don't care whom you run after. In fact, I thank God that He has helped me in time to see you as you are! But if you dare to cross these doors again with your acts of *charity*, I will be the very devil, and I don't know what I will do to you," he said clenching his fists.

Valli could no longer control her tears, and she began to sob helplessly, covering her face with her hands.

“Well, you need not make a scene here. You can go to that husband of yours and leave us in peace,” said Velan curtly.

“Hold your tongue! Who is my husband?” she cried, suddenly stopping in the intake of a sob and flying at him. The next moment, she sank to the ground weeping bitterly. “Don’t! don’t be a brute! I will never again darken your doors, but pray, let me alone for a few minutes,” she pleaded plaintively.

But Velan stood unmoved staring at her. She essayed to get up but could not. She had very nearly dislocated her ankle which was already sprained.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, won’t you go away! Don’t you see I can’t get up?” she sobbed. “Somebody may come and think badly of me. Oh, I beg of you, do go away,” she appealed pathetically.

“Don’t be foolish. It is for that very reason I want to take you to the verandah, and then look to your foot,” said Velan.

"You need not trouble yourself about my foot. It will be enough if you help me get to the verandah," said Valli.

Velan slowly raised her by her shoulders. Not only did she seem to have lost completely the use of her right foot, but it was also beyond doubt that she was suffering unberable pain. Her closed eyes and set teeth, and the movements of her face betrayed the intensity of her suffering. Velan led or rather bore her to the verandah, and gently placed her on the floor. He was trying to find out the extent of her injury, in spite of her protest, when his mother came in banging the back door and heartily cursing somebody.

As soon as she saw the prostrate form of Valli and by her side Velan, she stopped her vituperations and advanced towards them with a troubled look in her eyes.

"Mamma, Valli is badly hurt. She slipped and fell down. In fact, the fall was so loud that it awoke me," said Velan.

"I am glad that you have wakened at last," said Alamelu reprovingly, and then, noticing Valli's twisted ankle, she cried in dismay, "Oh,

my dear! you have broken your leg! I wonder whether it is only a dislocation or a broken bone. Vel, get some castor oil at once," she ordered in great excitement and tried to feel Valli's foot gently, whereupon the latter screamed and wouldn't let her touch her.

"Oh, my dear, will I hurt you? Just let me see what it is. Oh, my child! just now that wretched woman picked a quarrel with me about you, and here you are, already hurt," wailed Alamelu.

"Whom do you mean, Auntie?" queried Valli, her interest roused in spite of her pain.

"Whom else could I mean but that devil of our village, Meenakshi? She accuses me of having advised you not to marry her nephew, Mallan. Did I ever talk about it, child?—Why, she is only opening my eyes! A beautiful parrot like you to be sacrificed to that monster!—Oh, I simply can't bear it!" said Alamelu, shaking her head and hands.

Velan who had by now returned with the castor oil bottle in his hand, admonished his mother severely.

"Your foolishness will never leave you, Mamma. What right have you to say such silly things? Won't you look to her injury first?" he said in great disgust and ill-suppressed anger.

"I will, I will, my boy. It is because I love her as my own child that I can't bear to see her suffering," she said, gently spreading the oil on Valli's foot. Valli did not flinch. She was under some spell, stronger than an anaesthetic.

"You shouldn't be so plain with all and sundry, my dear," continued Alamelu, gently rubbing her foot. "Thangammal seems to have carried tales against you to Meenakshi. Did you tell her that you would rather commit suicide than marry Mallan?"

Valli could not reply. She averted her face in great distress, and once again Velan chided his Mamma.

"Can't you put off all this talk, Mamma? When will you learn? Do see about her foot," he fumed.

Valli now began to scream with pain. Alamelu was fumbling.

“With a sudden pull, it can be made right,” she said apologetically.

“Then why don’t you do it?”

“Even for this soft massaging she is crying so loud. How then could I—”

Velan covertly beckoned to his mother to keep quiet and move a little. Valli’s face was averted. Then with a sudden jerk, he set it right. Valli gave out one piercing yell and wept. “Oh, you wretch! You have killed me. Why, why did you do it?”

“He has only saved you, child. A little fomentation, and you will be all right. Stop! Oh, your scream has even disturbed your uncle. Vel, you stay here and fan her—look, how she is streaming with sweat. After attending to your father, I will heat some water for fomentation,” said Alamelu and went away.

Velan took hold of a palmyra fan which was stuck up in the thatched roof and was about to fan Valli, when she protested.

“I don’t need any fanning, and I shall feel grateful if you will kindly leave me. I can wait till Auntie attends to me,” said Valli.

Velan gazed at her for a minute or two in silence, and she gazed back at him without so much as a wink.

“I may not be so bad as you think,” he said.

“Your being good or bad matters little to me,” she replied.

“I am very glad that it is so. In fact, I have been wishing for it. If you think that I have been rather hard on you, it is because I believed that Mallan, you, and your mother were in league against me. Don’t misunderstand me. It was never my wish to thwart your marriage with Mallan; it was a settled fact and everybody knew that. And you may not believe me when I say that your happiness is more important to me than my own. So, when Mallan spoke about this campaign of “bringing home to us our own degradation”—all for the purpose of his marriage I went mad with the injustice of it all, especially when it was so unnecessary. It was so uncharitable and cruel. I know I am in the grip of Saturn, and misery overtakes me wherever I go, and at times, I don’t know my own mind. But even then, I was not prepared for such a thrust. Why, even now, I don’t understand why you should have been bringing food to our house.—You are doing this

with the knowledge of your mother and mine? Isn't that so?"

"Yes, er—no. Sometimes with the knowledge of both, and at other times, only the one or the other knowing. But to-day, my mother knows," she said rather reassuringly.

"Oh, Valli! you will drive me mad. Why do you do such things?"

"Because—"

"Because? go on, because of what?"

"I—I was foolish enough to think that I would save you all some suffering, whereas—" she stopped on account of the flood of tears. Velan stopped fanning and stood speechlessly staring at her in abject helplessness, his tell-tale looks supplicating for her forgiveness. Alamelu's arrival just then with a basin of hot water put an end to their conversation.

Half an hour's fomentation gave Valli very great relief, but as it was not possible for her to walk home in that condition, it was arranged to indent on Thoppai's bandy for taking her home.

However, Velan was yearning to talk over many things with Valli. So he contrived to send his mother away, by asking her to fetch a pitcher of fresh water from the river and take it to Valli's mother, who was sure to be eagerly waiting for it.

CHAPTER XI

THE PACT

The moment his mother left the house, Velan bolted the door and approached Valli who was sitting close to the wall and leaning against it for comfort. He devoured her with his looks for a minute, drew a deep sigh, and sitting by her side took hold of her hands, and begged for pardon. Valli was embarrassed. It was a long time since they had come into such close contact. The touch of his hands sent the blood mounting to her cheeks and thrilled her entire being. She tried to say that there was nothing to forgive, but she succeeded only in mumbling something inarticulate. And as for Velan, for the first time in his life, he felt himself swept off his feet by the mere touch of her hands. He had no idea till now what a tremendous power Valli exercised over him. As if with a wrench, he got up suddenly and paced up and down the thatched verandah in grim silence.

Gloom had suddenly descended on his face. Valli watched him with great concern.

She was conscious that he was in great trouble. He abruptly stopped before her and said, "I am so glad, so very glad that you have not changed at all, and I am extremely sorry that I was misled by the prattlings of Mallan. We have known and loved each other from our childhood and it would have been a terrible thing to me to have gone on thinking badly of you to the end of my life. Thank God! that weight is lifted off my heart. But there is another which worries me equally. Valli, you know I love you.—Will you do as I advise you?"

Valli nodded dubiously.

"Then, marry Mallan."

Valli gave a start as if she were stabbed, and her face was a study. The eyes expressed unmistakable anger, but the nervous lips betrayed her fear and a vague sense of helplessness.

"How dare you say that? Have you bought me with your money? Such insolence! What right have you to treat me like your property?" she fumed.

“Oh, Valli, do be gentle. My only right is that I love you. I love you so much, God only knows how much, that it would grieve me to see you suffering. Can't you see what I feel?” he pleaded.

“Shame on your love! You love me so much as to make a present of me to another man!” she sneered.

Listen, I warn you not to play with me. Don't take it into your head that I am throwing myself at you. I am as independent, perhaps even more independent, than any man among you. I don't know who made the rule that a girl *must* marry. Since I have got to marry somebody, I thought I would prefer you to that monkey. That is all and nothing more. So none of your suggestions. I know what to do.”

“What will you do?” asked Velan.

The question drove her to fury. “What does it matter to you? I shall do anything I like.—I never knew till now what a coward you were! You are afraid that Mallan and his friends will set upon you. Oh, you and your manliness!” she said, sarcastically laughing.

Velan was stung to the quick.

“Don’t be silly. I can take care of myself against a hundred Mallans. You *know* that I can be the very devil, if need be.”

“Then why do you fear? You think I will be a burden on you?”

Velan bit his lips. There was much truth on what she said. He chafed under the charge. He felt like a coward. But what made him a coward was not any consideration for his own self. Valli couldn’t see that. It was his duty to bring home to her the direst consequences of their marriage.

So, controlling his anger, he said, “Valli, you don’t see things as I do. Perhaps, you couldn’t. I wish I could open my heart and let you see everything. Do listen to me patiently. I have thought over these things many, many times and yet the solution baffles me. I tell you my father’s death is a question of months—yes, it is a fact. It will be a miracle if he lives for another year. I would cheerfully give my life to save his. But it won’t help. Something tells me that nothing could save him. I thought that my mother had put by some money, and was spending out of it. Now since I have been disillusioned, I shall take to any kind of work to seek our livelihood, and I will do my best to help him to a peaceful end.

When death does take him away, I shall persuade my mother to stay with her brother who, though poor, will certainly take care of her for the rest of her life. Then, I shall shake the dust of this wretched village from my feet for ever and ever. I shall take myself off to some lone corner of this wide world, where every face I see shall be a new one, where nothing will remind me of the horrible place which took away from me all that I loved and valued most in this life. You have no idea, you can't have any idea, of the rending of my heart. Here I am, helplessly looking on at the distress of persons who, though not my real parents, never once let me feel that I had any but them. In this case, the misery is not of my making, though that is no excuse for my uselessness to them and I can think of no expiation to wash out my failure to help them. But in *your* case, all the blame would be on me. I would be dragging you down from a life of comfort—and, perhaps, happiness too. I want you to understand that marrying me means being linked for life to a pauper who has to struggle for his daily bread, and that too, in a far off place. What an everlasting regret would it be to you!—and an everlasting wound to my already harassed heart. Now I have one remorse to prey on my heart to the end of my life, and there will be another to complete my

soul's agony. Therefore, I beg of you, my dear Valli, to take my advice," he pleaded almost beseechingly.

Valli sat mute for a minute. Her heart was too heavy to make speech possible.

"Is there not God to help us?" was her response.

Her words seemed to whip him into a fury.

"God! Where is God? Is there really one? If there were ever a God, He would not have allowed my father to suffer so many troubles. I cannot think of a nobler man than my father. He has harmed no one in this world. On the contrary, he has helped everybody, and yet he is spending his last days in inconceivable misery. If there is a God, He has been most cruel to us. Why should He have allowed Perumal and Chinnappan to quarrel?—just at the time of the harvest of our gram crop. Why should the fields have been set on fire? and why should we have come to this state? No, no; I doubt if there is a God."

"But we must have faith in God. That is what Granny Perayee says, and Auntie also says the same thing. Didn't we see the pantomime

show, Harischandra? Even a great king like him had to suffer. And when I saw Rani Chandra-mathi's sorrows, I couldn't control my tears. My saree was soaked wet. But at last God came to their rescue."

"I have lost faith in all those stories. But where is the need to discuss them now? Are you prepared to forsake your parents, and follow me to Kandy or Penang, or some such place beyond the seas and toil as a cooly, side by side with me?" he demanded.

"Did not Sita accompany Rama to the very jungle?" she said by way of an answer.

"Oh, Valli, you don't seem to know your own mind. When once you have decided, going back will be impossible, and I am sure that dreadful sufferings will overtake us both. Suppose I refuse to ruin you?—it will be nothing short of that."

"The bosom of Mother Kaveri is wide enough to give repose to one of Her children," she said solemnly. Velan noted the grim determination on her face. He knew that she meant what she said. He dumbly gazed at her for a minute, and then taking her into his arms covered her face with kisses.

“So for good or evil, our fates are linked together,” he said.

And Valli nestled closer to him by way of reply. Each knew that the one could not live without the other. They themselves could not say from when they began to like or love each other. It was an attachment of years, which the passage of time had ripened without their knowing it.

“Don’t let anybody know of our resolve, my dear—not even my mother. We will wait and hope. But do stop bringing provisions to my house. I shall somehow earn enough to maintain us. But don’t on this account stop coming here.”

“And how will you earn?” asked Valli with great concern.

“Channel clearing is going on at Manamedu. I shall enlist as a daily labourer. They want any number of hands.”

Valli did not appear to like the idea.

“You are an expert at climbing cocoanut trees. Why don’t you make use of that skill to earn some money?” she suggested.

“How ? ”

“You know some rich man from Sirur has taken on lease all the cocoanut palms on the channel bund for nearly six miles, from our village to Melanattam. He is camping now near Angamma’s temple and is interviewing a lot of people who can climb palms. It seems that there are thousands of palms to be cleared. You see I happened to pass that way yesterday evening and noticed the crowd near the temple. They were discussing the rates of wages. He doesn’t want to pay a daily wage but would fix some sum for every hundred nuts cleared. I am sure you can earn a rupee a day. For the present, why don’t you take up this work ? I saw Sambandam and Sankaran there.”

Velan was delighted. “Why, it would be just fun for me with money into the bargain.”

“So, you can go and meet him now. I feel quite well. My mother may come at any moment, and I don’t want that she should see us together alone,” she said smiling. Velan saw the wisdom of her advice, and giving her a hearty kiss, opened the door and went out.

CHAPTER XII

A WARNING

Velan was getting on very well in his new job. At first, he felt some delicacy as to what others might think about his work. But that feeling gradually wore away, and it was replaced by one of elation that he was doing his bit to maintain his parents in comfort. In the course of two weeks, he proved himself by his conduct and work to be the most efficient of all the climbers, and his employer began to have a special regard for him. He even hinted to Velan that he was considering whether to employ him permanently.—All this made Velan happy.

One afternoon, he was sitting amidst piles of nuts which he had gathered, and was enjoying the cool drink from a young nut, when he espied Veerappan and Madurai passing by.

He would have liked to avoid them. But it was too late, and the usual greetings followed.

However, there was some embarrassment which each tried to make light of, and in the course of talk, Velan got to know that they were on their way to his house to meet his father on some business. This set him thinking; for it was a long time since either had cared to see his father, and now that they were to see him together, the visit certainly foreboded nothing good. When they had gone some way, they looked back at him twice or thrice in a manner which convinced him that they were discussing him, and this knowledge made him still more uneasy. He had finished his work and would have very much liked to follow them. But the contractor had entrusted him with the duty of supervising the carting of the nuts, and he could not betray the trust.

So, vainly fidgeting till the last nut was loaded into the cart, he hurried towards home, with four young nuts strung together by their own fibre and slung across his shoulder. His mother, as was to be expected, could not give him any idea of the object of the visit. All she could say was that they had just left the house after having provoked his father into a violent temper by their talk. Velan, without wasting further time, entered his father's room—it would be more appropriate to call it his cell.

He noticed the agitated look of his father, who quietly beckoned to him to sit on the couch. And before Velan could open his mouth, his father himself began the topic.

"Those fellows, Madurai and Veerappan, had been here just now, Vel. Do you know what for? —To advise me to sell all our lands! Yes, to sell them to that slave dealer, the Kusappatti Kangani who is trying to get the whole village into his hands. And what is more, they had the impertinence to say that it would be to our advantage to sell the lands. I never knew that Madurai was such a time-serving fellow. It is true he helped us in our transaction with Meenakshi. —I shouldn't say this—if he has anything like a heart, he cannot forget what I have done for him. After all, he is a loafing dog who will wag his tail to every passer-by for a crumb. But what about Veerappan? What has come over him? If there is any man who knows what is in my heart, it is he," he said pointing to his chest with great pain.

"Probably Madurai has influenced him," observed Velan.

"I don't think so. I could see his earnestness. He began to give reasons. He spoke of the changing times and the constant failures of the

monsoon, and said that unless we had wet lands to fall back on, we were bound to suffer and suffer very hard. The idiot! he does not know that parting with my lands would cause me greater suffering. My great grandfather died of dysentery, because, against his will, my grandfather sold a small out of the way piece of land."

"We love our fields and gardens as dearly as our own lives. And do you think that the love is not reciprocal? I tell you they love us even more, because they have known our ancestors, and also know that we have lost them. Every tree in the garden has a peculiar attraction to us which fools cannot appreciate. Every fence, nay, the very ridges seem to recognize and extend a hearty welcome to us! Oh, my boy! heartless men can never know these things. But there is no harm in suffering—is there? I tell you we will get back all our lands into our own possession. Times will certainly change.—I see they have already changed. Yes, yes, help will come from that quarter, but I shall not be able to see him," he said melodramatically, pointing his finger this way and that.

Velan grew a little uneasy.

"Why should we worry ourselves about what these people say, Father? We will ignore them.

Next time I meet them, I shall ask them to mind their own business and leave you alone."

"Do so, by all means. I don't want them and their insolent advice," said Venkatachalam rather hotly.

"Mother is making pan cakes; shall I bring you a few?" asked Velan.

"Oh, I don't want them, Vel. I can't digest them. But—but if you can get some fried rice, I can munch it in comfort," said Venkatachalam in a tone that visibly expressed his mental suffering.

The idea that fried rice should have become a luxury to his father stabbed Velan's heart, and hastening to the nearest shop, he bought that dainty for him.

The pan cakes were hot and alluring but his mother would not let him have them.

"Do wait a bit, my dear. Valli will be coming now with treacle, and there is nothing so nice as hot cake and treacle," said Alamelu.

"But why do you expect her, just now? Is she quite fit so soon?"

"Fit as a fiddle. She said she would come. She and her mother were here this morning and stayed quite a long time."

"That is interesting news. Why didn't you tell me before?" he said in mock fury.

"Oh, I forgot. By the way, Valli's marriage with Mallan is almost fixed, and if nothing goes wrong, it is to come off by the end of this month—"

"So suddenly! But why should anything go wrong?" said Velan interrupting.

"Oh, you don't know. You can never be sure of a marriage till it takes place. Well, Lakshmi came to tell us, and in a way to apologize."

"Where is the need for an apology?" said Velan cutting her short and biting his lip.

"Once upon a time, we decided to marry you and Valli. Ah! how little did I know then that we would come to this state! Oh, my boy!" she said and burst into tears.

"There! There! Mother, don't be foolish. To what state have we come? You will see to what

state we rise. He laughs best who laughs last," he said gently caressing her hands.

"Well, well, nobody can escape the Lord's decree. But what I am surprised at is Valli's attitude, child. Not only has she no objection to the marriage but she seems even to welcome it. This morning, she was boasting of the costly jewellery that would be her own to wear for ever."

"There is nothing surprising in that, Mother. All women are that way," said Velan.

"Oh, you silly, you know so much about women!" said Alamelu beaming into a smile.

Just then Valli came in, holding a pot of treacle in her hand. Her face was radiant with health and beauty.

"Here is fine treacle for you all!" she said gaily.

"Well, let us take it with hot cakes. Oh, Mother, you have left a cake in the pan to burn. Don't you feel the smell? It is just like you — look to it at once," said Velan, and the moment her back was turned, he gave Valli a hearty kiss.

"Do be quiet. I am sure you will get us both into trouble," said Valli, gently chiding him in a low voice. "I have decided on a plan which you must know. I shall send away Auntie to my house on some pretext—was it very badly burnt?" enquired Valli loudly, noticing Alamelu coming out of the kitchen.

"Not at all, dear. But here are very good ones for you both," she said giving some cakes to Velan and Valli, and pouring treacle thereon.

"Mother wants you at once, Auntie. She is making three or four kinds of pickle, and she wants your advice about the right mixture of salt and chilli."

"Preparing for the marriage, I suppose?"

"Need you ask that, Auntie?" said Valli, archly smiling.

"Vel, do you know that Valli and Mallan are to be married on the twenty seventh of this month—barely eight days more?"

"Oh, so soon!" said Velan, his tone expressing unmistakable concern, but reassured by a covert sign from Valli, he added, "But it is no

surprise to me, Mother. It is what we have been expecting all along."

"Marriage makes no difference to me, Auntie. I began to love you all ever since I was a child, and I shall love you to the end of my days. And won't you be the same, Auntie?"

"Certainly, dear," said Alamelu more or less mechanically. Her mind seemed to be all blank. Valli noticed her perplexity.

"What ails you, Auntie?" she enquired.

"Nothing dear; you modern young people puzzle me. I am not able to understand you. Things were different in my days. That you should both treat so lightly such an important thing as marriage is really surprising to me."

"Oh, you simple soul!" said Valli and washing her hands, hugged her. "We are not so difficult to understand as you imagine. And now you must go to my house at once, or else my mother will take me to task. Go on, get up," she importuned.

"Oh, you and your hurry! Mustn't I put out the fire and put the kitchen in order?"

"Oh, I will attend to all that in no time, and follow you. You don't know, Auntie, that now-a-days my mother finds fault with me for everything. She fears that I may change my mind again and refuse to marry Mallan. Of course, she is entirely mistaken, and I am not responsible for her fears. I have sense enough to understand that there is not a richer man in the village than Mallan. Now you must go," she said and hustled her out of the house.

"You have grown very masterful," said Velan smiling.

"I couldn't help it. And now, it will be a long, long time before we meet again."

"How so?"

"For one thing, Mallan does not like my going about, and particularly he is dead against my coming to your house. And to satisfy his wishes, I am ordered by my mother to remain indoors till the marriage. So, that fellow is even now exercising his control over me, but he does not know that he and his forefathers together cannot bend me to his wishes.

"For another, I have made up my mind to lock myself in a room as long as I consider necessary. Now listen. My father had a sister who

went mad on the eve of her marriage. I have never seen her as she died before I was born. All say that I have taken after her in many ways. This gives me an idea. Why should not *I* also go mad on the eve of *my* marriage? They say such freaks run in the family—you need not laugh. I have resolved to lay that game. That is the only way in which we can defeat their plans and gain time.”

“But suppose they ill-treat you?” said Velan.

“Ah, don’t fear. My father loves me too well to allow such things. Besides, I shall give such a fine performance that they cannot molest me in any way. I invite you to see the fun,” she said, and both laughed.

“There is another thing I want to warn you of. I suspect some plot is being hatched against you by Meenakshi. My father and mother both seem to be aware of it. They talk about it in whispers now and then, and when I am near, they stop talking. Why, they even quarrel over it sometimes. I suspect that Uncle Madurai also is in league with Meenakshi. I can see nothing clearly except that Father and Mother do not agree on something that vitally concerns you. So,

my dear, be always on the alert ; and if there is anything serious, do send word to me through Auntie—I shall see that Auntie comes to my house frequently. And if I suspect anything, I shall promptly let you know through her. I had no idea of taking her into our confidence. But when things come to such a pass, we can't do without her, and God is bound to help us.—What do you think ? ”

“ The God who taught us to love each other, will know how to fulfil it,” said Velan solemnly and kissed her.

“ Vel, is it not a sin to kiss before one is married ? Of late, you are doing it often. Is it right ? ”

“ You silly, where is the harm in a kiss ? Besides, whom do I kiss—is it not my own beloved ? Even God cannot part us. We will face the whole world and live or die together,” he said, and took her into his arms. And Valli seemed to acquiesce whole heartedly in his views.

CHAPTER XIII

A DISCLOSURE

Velan sat still for a long time after Valli had left, his face wreathed in smiles. Life had never before seemed to him to be so full of charms. He had come to know what happiness was, and he was not going to let it slip through his fingers. He was dreaming of the wonderful time he and Valli would have together, and the things he would do to deserve her love. But, by and by, the constant thought of the future brought in its train many misgivings. He began to feel that there was much truth in Valli's apprehension. The recent visit of Madurai and Veerappan to his father and their suggestion that he should sell most of his lands to the Kusappatti Kangani only deepened the mystery. He was at a loss to understand the motive which prompted them to advise such a course. Were they working for or against Meenakshi? It was impossible that Madurai would work against

Meenakshi. His past benefits from her would be nothing to what he would gain through her in the future.

But so far as their property was concerned, what had Meenakshi to wish for? She had taken possession, and was virtually the proprietress of all their wet lands. So he came to the conclusion that it had something to do with Valli's marriage. The entire village knew with what feelings he looked towards Valli. Probably Meenakshi scented trouble from him, and if so, how foolish of her! And he smiled to himself at the thought of the trouble she would get from Valli herself. He thought of approaching Madurai for some information, but it was doubtful whether Madurai would care to tell him. As for applying to Veerappan, a sort of pride and delicacy put it out of the way. Well, he would watch developments, and anyway, everything would be known within a week at the most. And further, he was no stranger to troubles, and he would be game for anything. With this consolation, he got up and went about his business.

The following day happened to be New Year's Day. It was a festive occasion, and everybody from the poorest to the richest was expected to feel (or rather to arrange to feel) happy and comfort-

able, since it was a general belief that the day's happenings, good or bad, were an index to the trend of events throughout the rest of the year.

And as it was also considered essential that every one should taste mangoes and margosa flowers—in the form of some pickle or other—the villagers hunted for these things in all available places.

The place most crowded this morning was the irregular row of mango trees which followed the meandering course of a runnel, serving as a drain to most of the valuable wet lands of the village. There were about thirty trees in all, and they were the common property of the villagers whose lands abutted on the runnel. But the rights of property were never exercised except when a tree was felled. And to-day, the trees were full of the village lads who competed with one another in climbing. There were also several elders below who were content to take whatever the boys were pleased to throw them. It was altogether a merry gathering. Velan with two others was on a tree known as the 'Cocoanut yielder', so named on account of the size of its fruit. This had been his favourite tree ever since his childhood, and it was also at the tail end of the Snail Farm. Collecting some mangoes, Velan was about to come down from the

tree, when he espied Mallan and his father coming towards the same tree with one of their servants, evidently for the same purpose. Halting below the tree, Mallan silently watched Velan's descent from the tree with arms akimbo, a picture of self importance.

As soon as Velan came down, Mallan contemptuously sized him up with his looks for the space of a few seconds and said, "Are you not ashamed?"

Velan was taken aback.

"I don't understand you," he said, determined to avoid a quarrel with him in view of the future developments.

"What right have you to gather mangoes from this tree?" demanded Mallan.

"Oh, I see," said Velan understanding the situation. "The same right all the people here have," he added pointing to the small crowd that had already collected around them.

"They all own lands here," said Mallan, though he knew that there were some who had no lands there.

"I also do. This 'Snail Farm' is ours. Its mortgage does not mean that we have lost all claims over it," replied Velan.

"Then why don't you cultivate it?" said Mallan, mocking him.

The meanness of the remark was not liked by anybody, and before Velan could retort, one of his friends said rather mischievously, "Oh, Mallan's approaching marriage seems to make him very manly."

The meaning of the insinuation was not lost upon Mallan, and he was burning with anger, and struggling for a suitable reply, when Velan added, "You will see what is coming to him, whether marriage or something else." Velan bit his lip. The regret was too late. Mallan's father, who had been quiet all this time, now pushed his way to Velan and gesticulated wildly.

"What—what do you mean by that? What will you do? You must tell me the meaning of that threat. Instead of being ashamed of stealing another man's property, you begin to threaten us. Now, all of you have heard his words," he continued pointing to the assemblage, "I won't leave him before he tells me what he intends to do to us," he said, taking hold of Velan's hand.

"Here, take off your hands," shouted Velan shaking himself free. "You and your property! To Hell with your mangoes!" he said, throwing them violently before Mayandi. Mayandi trembled with fear and drew back quickly. He almost believed that he had been assaulted.

"How dare you, you insolent beggar! Kanniappa, thrash that scoundrel; it does not matter even if I have to spend a thousand for it," cried Mallan to his servant.

"You rascal! Are you not man enough to face me? Here and now, I will make your pop eyes fly out of their sockets," Velan roared, and pounced on Mallan. A number of men quickly intervened and held him back with great difficulty. But Mallan had already moved far back, with his characteristic prudence, and was bawling out, "You are a loafer, begging for your daily bread, and yet you have so much audacity. My friend, you shall have your reward to-morrow. Yes, positively to-morrow. Remember me then."

Velan was like one possessed.

"You shall have your reward now," he screamed, and suddenly freeing himself from his friends, flew at Mallan and floored him with a

pull at his tuft. Instantly, Velan was overpowered by half a dozen people, and was prevented from inflicting further injuries on Mallan. Realizing the danger of a serious quarrel and its grave consequences, some of Velan's friends carried him away from the spot, and would not leave him till he was out of Mallan's sight.

Velan had regained his composure by now, but though he assured his friends that he would go straight home, one of them took care to accompany him as far as his house, and also to leave with him a few mangoes—at which Velan sadly smiled.

He was loth to tell anything about this incident either to his mother or to his father.

He wanted to be alone. His mother was engaged in her usual drudgery somewhere in the house. So, placing the mangoes in the kitchen, he went into the granary room and lay down.

He felt extremely miserable that the New Year should have commenced for him in that manner. He calmly and dispassionately reviewed the causes which led up to the quarrel. How was he responsible for it? Whoever could think that taking a few mangoes would be objected to—letting alone the question whether he had a right

or no to the tree? Why, it looked as if Mallan and his father sought him on purpose to pick a quarrel. How else could he account for their behaviour, which was the strangest he had ever known? But one thing he might have done. He might have refrained from alluding to the trouble that was to be expected at the time of the marriage. He had needlessly given them a warning which might frustrate Valli's plans, and in a way, he felt that he had also betrayed her trust. But there was no use in crying over spilt milk.

He must face the consequences. And what was the reward ^{at a price} that Mallan had promised for the morrow? He was certain that some dreadful thing was to happen to him. Or else Mallan would not have bragged in that way. It was only a matter of twenty four hours, and he would know everything. But why should he wait till then? Had he not a right to know what concerned him? Surely, Veerappan and Madurai must be in the know of things. He couldn't think of going to Valli's house. It was absolutely out of the question. But he would force Madurai to give out whatever he knew. He dare not refuse him. Yes, he would wrest it from him. Thought and action were simultaneous with him, and he abruptly left the house for Madurai's.

"I *do know* him, Vel. But instead of losing everything, lock, stock, and barrel, as they say, is it not better to retain something?"

"But where is the danger now? The lands are safe enough for sixty years. By then, nobody knows what upheavals will take place," said Velan.

"Ah, there you are mistaken, lad. Thanks to the Satanic advice of her brother, Meenakshi has secured a certain document from Palaniyandi Pillai. With the help of this she can bring to auction all your property in no time."

Velan was staggered. "I don't understand you, Uncle. Won't you tell me *everything*?" begged Velan.

Madurai again took a look around him and said, "I will, my boy; but not a word of this to another soul. You know that two years after the mortgage of the lands, your father took a loan of five hundred rupees from Palaniyandi Pillai of Vannarpet on a promissory note?—Well, not a pie has been paid to that account. I don't blame your father.—What could he do, poor fellow? Now this Pillai seems to have been anxious to realize the money. Somehow, Mayandi got to know this, and he at once paid him not only the principal and interest due, but I was told some-

thing more, to have the claim made over to him. I tell you it is all the mischief of that puny shameless ass, who lives and flaunts on a widow's bounty. Even Meenakshi was not for going so far. But that sinner was bent upon it. Oh, my boy! it is his idea to drive you out of the village, bag and baggage.—Do you know why?—because you are his son's greatest rival! Yes, he is not ashamed of saying, that, even if Valli marries his son, she will not be true to him so long as you live in the village.”

“The rascal!” fumed Velan. “He will learn a thing or two soon. But how does it affect us so seriously—and at once too? For God's sake, don't keep me in suspense, Uncle. I beseech you,—why won't you make everything plain to me?”

“I will, I will, my boy. They have instituted a suit against you for nearly a thousand rupees on account of principal and interest, and costs. Your father may be getting the summons any time, even to-day. If you are not able to pay the amount—and I know there is no hope—they may proceed against your property. And what with plenty of lawyers in these days to advise for good or evil, they may manage to take away all your lands without leaving you a pie in the bargain.

They may even, as they did in one case, proceed against the person for the balance, if any."

"Does my father know about this suit and what it means?" queried Velan nervously.

"He doesn't. He simply wouldn't let me tell him anything that day. He was raving like a lunatic. Reasonable talk was impossible with him. He called me a hundred names and said that I was in the pay of Meenakshi.—I don't mind them all. I am only sorry that we failed to persuade him. God only knows what will happen. Mayandi is a brute. He may even take your house and turn you out. Hereafter, if there is any person who can talk to your father on this subject, it is yourself. Wait till you receive the court summons. Then, with its help, convince him of the real danger. If you bring him round, you will have done something great. He loves you most dearly, and he may yet listen to your word."

"Is that all, or is there anything more I should know?" queried Velan sadly.

"Is this not enough, my boy? But don't be disheartened. God will show you a way out of the difficulty."

"God!" said Velan smiling vacantly. "I cannot understand a God who gives Mayandi and Mallan power over others."

“Oh, don’t talk like that. However good we may be now, we cannot escape the effects of our past misdeeds.”

“I don’t know all that,” said Velan dubiously and, thanking Madurai for his kind advice, took leave of him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LOVE OF DUST

In the evening, the temporary pandal (a high thatched shed) near the temple of the village deity was crowded. A Brahman priest was giving a forecast of the year just begun, with the help of the newly cast almanac, laying special stress on the agricultural prospects. While the elders listened with rapt attention, the boys, of whom there were very many, and whose interest in the proceedings was not the forecast but the light refreshments that were to follow at the end of the discourse, were playing and making a noise, much to the disgust of the elders, from whom they frequently drew angry rebukes.

Velan was standing in a lone corner, all by himself. At other times, he would have derived fun from such situations, but to-day he was in no mood to be frivolous. One of the urchins was exceedingly mischievous and even disrespectful;

and when Velan chid him, he made faces at him and grew deliberately more boisterous : whereupon Velan chased him out of the pandal. While so doing, he saw Madurai and a turbaned man engaged in an earnest conversation under one of the huge margosa trees.

As soon as Madurai saw Velan, he came towards him with rapid strides, leaving the other man where he was.

“ This is the process server. Take him to your house,” he said briefly, without even stopping near Velan, and went into the pandal. Velan nodded his head, while his eyes expressed his sincere gratitude. He found the process server quite a good man, and nothing like what he had imagined.

“ Madurai is a friend of mine, and he told me all about your father,” he said by way of explanation. “ What do I gain by letting all and sundry know about his misfortune? Let us go to your house quietly and finish the business. I am an unwanted man everywhere, and my presence is sure to cause much talk,” he added smiling.

Velan thanked him for his kind consideration and took him to his house by a narrow path that ran along the back of the village.

At first, Venkatachalam wouldn't believe that it was meant for him. He wouldn't even look at the summons. But, by and by, Velan brought home to his distraught mind his transaction with Palaniyandi Pillai.

Patiently, and step by step, he explained to him Mayandi's perfidy in getting the claim transferred in his own favour from Palaniyandi Pillai, and the sinister motives which lay behind that move. Only then and not till then, did he deign to read the summons.—Conviction came to him like a bolt from the blue. The document seemed to scorch his fingers, and the astounding nature of its implication threw him into a frenzy.

"It is the conspiracy of those scoundrels," he bawled out, and forgetting for the nonce his permanent disability, he vainly attempted to jump up to a sitting posture, and then was convulsed with unbearable pain. "I see the hand of Madurai in this—and Veerappan too," he cried, gritting his teeth and shaking his fists.

"You are mistaken, Father. They are only helping us," put in Velan.

"Helping us! you fool! you dunce! They are stranglers, they are the very Thugs, and you want

to offer your neck to their noose!" bellowed Venkatachalam, quivering with excitement.

Velan was convinced of his foolishness in having contradicted him and he was loth to let a stranger witness further scenes.

So he gently suggested, "We must send this gentleman away, Father. Why should he wait?—he has been very considerate to us."

"Certainly, certainly," agreed Venkatachalam and scrawled his signature on the space indicated, without moving from his recumbent posture.

Pocketing the acknowledgment, the process server took leave of them, as he was only too glad to get away from that spot.

Velan sat silently for some time. He was waiting for his father's anger to cool down a bit. But he was mistaken. As if the respite meant only renewed strength, Venkatachalam burst out once more. "The murderers! Between the two of them, they have managed to cut my throat. I trusted them like my brothers, and this is what they have done! The traitors! Cripple as I am, I will wring their necks if they come within my reach! And that outcast beggar, Palaniyandi, should he have done this without

even so much as a word to me? Eight hundred and fifty eight rupees! Where can I get it? Oh, Lord, it is a conspiracy to ruin me!" he moaned.

"Father, it is no doubt a conspiracy; but the conspirators are not Uncle Maduri and Uncle Veerappan—oh, do listen to me for just a minute, Father, and you will see the truth. It is all the vile work of Mayandi, who wants to drive me away from the village. You see, the day after to-morrow Valli and his son are to be married—"

"The day after to-morrow! So soon!" said Venkatachalam, relapsing into thoughtfulness. "Everything seems to happen with terrible suddenness in these days. Valli to be married to that monkey! What has the world come to?"

Without allowing him to proceed further, Velan quietly put in, "And he is not ashamed of saying that so long as I remain in the village, Valli will not be true to his son."

In spite of his misery, Venkatachalam laughed with a loud guffaw.

"Now you see, Father, why he is waging war against us," continued Velan. "I was told that even Meenakshi was not for it. But he goes beyond her in his meanness. And as for

Uncle Madurai and Uncle Veerappan, they are trying their best to help us, and I think it would be a sin if we went on suspecting them," he added with mild deprecation. The remark went home.

"Don't I know them, my boy? Troubles have come on me so thick and fast that with a little strain my brain gets confused. What am I to do? They are the only two friends left to me in this world to advise and help me. What arrangements are they making?" he queried eagerly.

Velan perceived the trend of his thought. In disabusing his mind of something, he had misled him into believing something else. So he quickly corrected him. "Poor men! what arrangements can they make? They command as little credit as ourselves. They can only sympathize with and advise us."

"Quite true, quite true," admitted Venkatachalam. "But what am I to do now? The moment the suit is decreed against me, they will try to bring the lands to auction. Who will help me?—who?—who? Ah, how I wish I had him by my side now. He would be full of suggestions and nothing would daunt him. His very ruin was due to his courage.—Do you know whom I mean, Vel?" Velan nodded his head comprehendingly.

“But, my boy, your knowledge is only hearsay. Your father left our village while you were in your mother’s womb, and from that day, the stars turned against me—because one half of me was dead. I was quite willing to offer all I had as security for him. But he wouldn’t agree, since this would only ruin both. It was true. He had so madly committed himself to such enormous liabilities.

And your mother left you when you were only a few days old. So what can you know of the people who brought you into the world? We brought you up.—And did we ever let you feel their absence, Vel?”

“Oh, Father, don’t! don’t!” said Velan bursting into tears.

“There, there, what have I done, my child?” said Venkatachalam caressing Velan’s head with trembling fingers.

“Nothing. Even a hundred lives will not be sufficient to repay the debt I owe you,” he said, quickly controlling himself.

“I have hurt you, my boy, without the least intention. I am getting old and blundering. What I wanted to tell you was that you cannot find your father’s equal in a million. He was so noble and

unselfish. His generosity proved his own undoing, and his fortitude—oh, I shudder to think of it even to-day. With one stroke of the pen, he sold thirty acres of wet land. There was nothing too great for him. But I am not made that way. It is nearly twenty years since he left the village, and God knows whether he is dead or alive,” said Venkatachalam, musing.

Velan did not like to interrupt him.

“There are many who emigrated after him and have returned with money,” continued Venkatachalam in the same placid and thoughtful manner. “But I am sure he could not have made any money. For he would simply abhor the way in which these Kanganies (recruiting agents) earn their fortunes. I tell you it is nothing short of slave dealing. But the unrighteous seem to have all the advantages of this world. Now, look at Kusappati Kangani. His funds seem to be inexhaustible. He is buying village after village.—Vel, an idea has come to me! Why shouldn’t we approach him for some help? Nine hundred rupees will be nothing to him,” said Venkatachalam, his eyes suddenly glowing with the brightness of hope.

“But he has definitely told Uncle Madurai that he will only buy and not lend,” said Velan.

“Curse Madurai! What does he know? I want you to go along and tackle him successfully. It all depends on how you manage the business. He knows our history and he may have some regard for us. Something tells me that he will help us. If I could only accompany you!” said Venkatachalam, moaning pathetically.

Velan promised to carry out his father’s mandate, the first thing next morning.

Kusappatti was about six miles away from their village. As the journey to and fro, and the stay there, would take some hours, Velan helped himself to an early repast of cold rice and set out on his errand.

When he had walked about half a mile, he met the village potter and his wife coming towards him, with large baskets of different shapes of pots on their heads. As soon as they saw him, they exchanged whispers. He knew that they were talking about him—of course, with great sympathy.

They had supplied pots to his house ever since he was a child, and he was eager to convince them that he was not at all sad. So he smiled at them and said with a wink, “For Mallan’s wedding, I suppose.”

“Yes, Master. Our marriages are fixed at our very births. It is God’s work and we shouldn’t be sorry—”

“You foolish fellow, you talk as if I were sorry. Do I look like that? I am only sorry it will not be possible for me to attend. Won’t they make a nice and well matched pair?” he said, laughing outrageously. “By the way, at what time does the ceremony come off?”

“At about five O’clock to-morrow morning, Master,” replied the potter, who was at his wit’s end to understand Velan’s behaviour.

“Well, I wish the couple all happiness and prosperity, and you, good people, plenty of feasts and presents,” he said, winking again mischievously, and took leave of them.

All the way, his mind was occupied only with the incidents that were bound to develop during the next twenty four hours, and that would set the whole village talking with one tongue.

In fact, he dwelt on this subject so long that when he reached Kusappati, he forgot for a space the purpose which took him there.

The Kangani was a man of unassuming manners, but deep and calculating. He gave Velan

a patient hearing, and then, politely but decisively, expressed his inability to comply with his request.

“Investment in lands means to me purchasing them outright. I don’t lend money on lands—for the matter of that, on any security. I am not doing lending business. But one thing I can do. Everybody talks very highly of your lands. So, just to oblige you, and perhaps for the sake of fancy also, I may pay a little more. That man Madurai from your village insisted that I should take over all your assets and liabilities and let you have, free of all encumbrances, one acre out of a plot of second rate wet land, in a remote corner of the village. He called it by some name—er—”

“The Potter’s Farm,” prompted Velan.

“Yes, the same. Well, he told me that its area is over five acres and that it yields only one crop in the year. Is it so?”

“Yes, sir; but that one crop is almost double what first rate wet land yields,” asserted Velan.

“But I am told that you raise three crops on the other wet lands.”

“It is quite true, sir. But you can’t, on that account, rate their value at a third of the usual price,” argued Velan.

"Well, you are only strengthening my case, my dear man," said the Kanganis smiling. "Madurai told me that with the produce of one acre of that plot, your small family would be able to get along comfortably. Now, I would make it two acres, and I don't think you would ever have a better offer."

Velan was most agreeably surprised. "You are very generous, sir, and I cannot sufficiently thank you for your kindness," he said expressing his feelings.

"Well, you should know that I am not considering it merely as a business deal. I know all about your family, and I know also what a wrench the sale must cause to your father, and I don't want that he should be always nursing a sense of injury by me. This has considerably influenced my decision. And now, I have to go out on urgent work. So you must excuse me. But don't go away without having some food."

"Oh, thank you, sir. But I don't feel hungry. There is one thing—er—I want to say."

"What is that?"

"I cannot say how very grateful I feel for your offer, sir. But my father is very foolish, nay, quite mad. He is averse to selling anything, and I may

take some time to bring him round. If meanwhile, you will kindly lend the small sum we require—”

“If your father is averse to selling, I am equally averse to lending,” said the Kangani with finality. “Try to persuade him; try, try, and now I must be off—Here, Ranga, take him to the dining hall and ask the cook to serve him,” he directed one of his servants and abruptly left him.

Velan was given no time to excuse himself. Further, he had begun to have a liking for the man and was curious to see his house and his household. So he quietly followed the servant to the dining hall, where the cook treated him to a dinner the like of which he had never tasted before. He was convinced that his father, as in many other things, was mistaken in his prejudice against the Kanganis, and if there was one man who could save them from destitution, and help them to hold up their heads once more, it was certainly this Kangani.

Most of the way home, he was thinking of the various ways of broaching the subject to his father so as to convert him to his own view. But as he came nearer and nearer to his village, he became aware of the great stir that was being caused by Mallan's marriage. He passed a number of

women with pots of milk on their heads intended for the marriage in the Pannai (manor) house. There were several men with large baskets of flowers slung on their shoulders bound for the same destination. Farther on, he came across two big carts, full of tall plantain trees, with their leaves and clusters intact, to adorn the entrances to the marriage pandal. (a temporary thatch-covered court) Everything seemed to promise a grand function, and he was beginning to doubt whether Valli would have the courage to carry out her plans. And if she failed!—further thought was impossible to him. Fortunately for him, his intense mental suffering was rudely disturbed by hilarious shouts and laughter. He looked in the direction of them and immediately dived down. Then crossing an irrigational channel close by, he entered a plantain field and ran on, till he was safe from observation. Panting, he looked back. Neither could he see anybody, nor could he be seen by others.—What were Mallan and his boon companions doing there?—and at that time of the day! Never had he felt more sensitive in his life. But he was glad that they had not seen him. He was quite sure about that, and he was not going to take any more risks. So, circumventing them by trotting along ridges and runnels, he reached home in a state of excitement.

Controlling his emotions, he briefly narrated to his father all that had happened between him and the Kangani, but took care to suppress the concession of an additional acre, as he intended to use it as a trump card at the last stage.

“My dear boy, we can’t hope to persuade him in one day by one talk. See him again to-morrow, and if necessary, once again the day after to-morrow. He may relent. My prayers will not go in vain. God will influence his mind,” said Venkatachalam helplessly.

“But he has definitely refused to lend, Father. He will only buy and not lend, and he expressed it so unmistakably and so often that it was annoying to me.”

“The bloodsucker! Every rascal is after our property, and not one is actuated by good motives.”

“But the Kangani does not seem to be a bad fellow. From the trend of his talk, I believe he is kindly disposed towards us.”

“It is only when you talk like that that you show your foolishness, Vel. He is out to deprive us of all our lands, and you call him kind,” said Venkatachalam bitterly.

“Pray, listen, Father. What are Meenakshi and Mayandi doing? They are out to *rob* us of all our possessions and throw us out on the streets as beggars. And don't you see they have succeeded? A month hence, and I don't know whether we shall have even this house to live in. Compared with them, is not the Kangani a good man? It seems he told Uncle Madurai that he would let us have one acre out of Potter's Farm, free of all encumbrances. He hinted to me, nay, why should I hide the truth?—he told me that as a special favour, he would give us *two* acres in Potter's Farm. I think it is really very generous of him to agree to that. If we accept his offer, a decent and independent living will be assured to us, and we can once more hold up our heads. Otherwise, God only knows what is in store for us.”

“And so?” said Venkatachalam, a strange expression suddenly coming into his face.

“I beg of you to put up with our misfortune heroically and to suffer the loss of the lands patiently in order to avoid greater sufferings—and dishonour too,” said Velan holding his hands beseechingly.

Venkatachalam contemptuously pushed him away. “You traitor! have you also joined hands

with Madurai and Veerappan? How dare you! You ask me to sell my lands? Who are you? What right have you to advise that? Ha! ha! after all, you are only a stranger, not of my own flesh and blood, and how can you know of my love for my lands? Bargained for a decent and independent living, did you?—Remember that to us, our lands are dearer than our lives. Well, it is all my fault. I had no business to entrust the work to a third person like you.”

“Oh, Father, I never meant to hurt you. I made the suggestion only for your sake. Believe me, oh do believe me. I meant it only for your welfare,” cried Velan trembling from head to foot.

“Here, no more of your concern for me. Is it because I fed you? What a fool I was to expect that you would become one of our own! Could apples grow on thistles? But there is such a thing as gratitude—”

“Oh Father, don't be cruel, don't! don't!” begged Velan closing Venkatachalam's mouth with his palm. “I don't deserve it, and I can stand it no longer. Kill me with this billhook and then say what you please,” he said suddenly drawing out his billhook from his waist band and placing it

in Venkatachalam's hands. Venkatachalam stared at him wildly. His brain seemed to have ceased to function.

The trance lasted for the space of a minute. "What do you mean? what do you mean? Oh, for God's sake, don't torture me with your presence. Get you gone," roared Venkatachalam, and Velan, taking the billhook with him staggered out of the room. His mind and body ached under the harassment of inexplicable forces. He slowly dragged himself to the granary room and fell down in a heap.

CHAPTER XV

ON THE EVE OF MARRIAGE

Velan was sunk in the uttermost depths of misery. He felt as if a hundred scorpions had spread all over his body and were stinging him continuously. He was sure that Hell—if at all there was such a place—would be more endurable than his world. At one time, he felt like being lifted to the very heavens, and fancied that he saw strange visions. The very next moment, he felt as if he was being hurled headlong to everlasting perdition, and the very fall seemed to choke and bewilder him. If anybody had asked him what his trouble was, he would not have been able to explain. He clutched his head with both hands and tried to reason it out. But countless currents and cross currents seemed to be racing through his brain, and he tried in vain to collect his thoughts on the issues before him. By and by, and by slow degrees, he saw through the haze of his conflicting emotions the facts of the situation.

“Not of his flesh and blood! Not of his flesh and blood! Whoever said I was?—Oh, Mother, why didn’t you kill me before you died?” he cried, groaning.

“He talked of gratitude—what does he mean? Am I ungrateful? Did I bargain for my sake? How mean of him! How mean! And he knows that I cannot discharge my indebtedness to him! Oh, Lord, it is too much for me, too much,” he complained bitterly. Even a sort of hatred of Venkatachalam began to spring in his heart, and in this frame of mind, he looked back on his life. But the review only made him still more miserable. The visions of his childhood and boyhood, and the affection that had been lavished on him by his father smote him with remorse. And with a thump in his heart, he realized that even long after he had attained the age of discretion, he was under the impression that his Father was his real parent. What then was the cause of the change in his father? Was there really any change in him? Or, oh, Lord! was he wronging his beloved father? And if so, why?—why? Was he under any evil influence?—possessed by any devil? Yes, yes, surely; and he saw the devil in Mayandi. It was *that* Satan who had brought ruin and misery to his peaceful home. But would he let him succeed?—would he? No, assuredly not, so long as he was

alive. He suddenly got to his feet and limbered up his body as if he had just risen from a sleep. He winked, as if somebody was before him. He gesticulated, as if he were boxing and laughed aloud. His behaviour was not altogether like that of a sane man.

He kissed the billhook and shoved it into his waist band, and cutting a caper, went out of the house.

At the channel-culvert near the entrance to the village, there lay an old and dead cocoanut palm which had been uprooted by the winds long ago. Velan was sitting on it with legs crosswise and grinding his billhook on its scaly surface. To aid him in his work, he now and then sifted on the wood the soft sand at his feet, and went on grinding. While he was so engaged, he saw Arumugam and his friend Masillamani proceeding to the tavern on the outskirts of the village. Arumugam was a middle-aged man of jovial disposition, who was a favourite with all, particularly the young people with whom he was always fond of cracking jokes. He was one of the kindest in the village, but most hopelessly given to drinking, the evil effects of which were seen in his drooping eyelids, his sagging cheeks, and a general flabbiness of body.

“Hullo, Uncle, do you know why I am sharpening my billhook?” said Velan hailing him.

“Trying to knock off from somebody’s tree a big bunch of cocoanuts?” said Arumugam, smiling.

“Oh, no ; guess again,” said Velan, winking.

“Ah, you are after the sugarcane-cutting wager.”

“Oh, nothing of the kind,” said Velan contemptuously. “Well, this billhook is thirsting to test its sharpness on Mayandi’s neck,” he said, crouching and nodding his head like a bloodsucker. Arumugam was taken a back. “The boy has gone crazy,” he said aside to his friend.

“No wonder ; the sweetheart for whom he waited all these years has now been snatched away from him,” whispered back Masillamoni.

Light came to Arumugam quickly, and he understood the tenseness of the situation.

“My dear Vel, there are greater pleasures in this world than the mere love of a woman. You come along with me and you will know for yourself,” he said, throwing his arm over Velan’s shoulder coaxingly.

"Ha, ha, I know what you mean, Uncle," said Velan laughing. "I have never drunk and why should I now?"

"And why should you not? There is so much fun in it that I would say that all who miss it are fools. When we drink, we bring down Heaven on earth, my boy," said Arumugam, laughing boisterously.

He had made up his mind to take the boy to the village pub and ply him with drink till he became quite tipsy. He was not a bad man, but now he did not attempt to consider whether he was right or wrong in seducing the boy. Velan raised his eyebrows and considered for a moment. Then cocking his head in great self-conceit, he said, "Right ho! Uncle. Is there anything I cannot do?—I am out for anything and everything," he added, shoving his billhook in his waist band, and followed Arumugam to the tavern.

The village pub was a mere thatched shed in which no stock was kept. The toddy vendor came with his commodity in the evening, sold whatever he could, and if anything was left unsold, took it home—probably to be mixed with the new stuff on the morrow.

Velan experienced some compunction in entering the tavern, but Arumugam and Masillamoni left him no option. Half coaxingly and half forcibly, they dragged him in. The first draught gave him some trouble. He wrinkled up his face, spat like a mad man, and even tried to bolt. But thanks to the efficient coaching of Arumugam, he soon settled down to drink peg after peg till the stuff went home. He prattled like a child for some time, and took into his confidence all those present in the pub.

But, by and by, the struggle for expression became greater and greater, until he finally collapsed to the ground. Some of the regular visitors upbraided Arumugam for having intoxicated the boy, but he defended himself by arguing that his only object was to keep him out of mischief, as he was mad enough even without drink.

The moon had already risen, and the toddy vendor was preparing to go home, collecting the unsold liquor in a big gourd. After his departure, Arumugam and Masillamoni discussed the question of escorting Velan home, but finding it impossible to remove him except with the help of a bandy, and being themselves not very sober, they decided to let him lie where he was. On second thoughts, they gently draggd him to one end of the hut so as

to give his face the full benefit of the breeze. Arumugam, in his eagerness to goad Velan, had taken more than his usual quantity and was feeling very sick. He tried to refresh himself by bathing his face with a tumbler of the cool water, a potful of which was always kept in the hut by the considerate vendor, particularly in the summer months. He even drank a cupful of the fresh liquid, but got poor relief.

So with great difficulty and leaning on his friend for support, he set out for his home, consoling himself on the way that he had done only 'good' to the boy who would surely 'come to himself' within two or three hours.

Alamelu was tired of waiting for Velan. The supper had gone cold; and this night she had taken great pains in preparing the drumstick soup of which he was very fond. It was growing very late, and the doors of the neighbouring houses were being closed for the night. Her husband, whom she generally fed soon after sunset, was fast asleep and snoring.

But still Velan did not make his appearance. She grew uneasy. As the night advanced and still Velan did not return, she got alarmed. She thought of awakening her husband and letting him

know. But what was the use? She would only be causing him unnecessary anxiety.

So bolting the street door from outside, she went to the houses of two of his intimate friends, and disturbed them and their households too, to enquire about Velan. But as neither of them had seen him throughout the day, they could not enlighten her.

One of them suggested that he might have gone to Amaravathi, a neighbouring village, where a pantomime show was going on. Velan had a friend in that village, who only two or three days ago was worrying Velan to come and see the show.

So Alamelu was made to conclude that Velan had gone to Amaravathi, and she was assured that he would return early in the morning. The idea greatly pacified her, but it was so unlike her boy, who would not go anywhere without informing her beforehand. Probably his friend had dragged him away hastily, and he had no time to come and tell her. Very likely. With this consolation, she went home and lay down to rest.

But sleep was impossible, and she was restlessly tossing in her bed, turning over one

possibility after another. It was past midnight and the atmosphere was getting cooler and cooler. A perfect stillness reigned over the village, but that gave no peace to the troubled mind of Alamelu. It only made her think more anxiously. Somehow she took it into her head that he might have been bitten by a cobra while crossing the fields and might be lying dead somewhere. Her heart stopped beating. She was passing through a terrible nightmare and was reaching the limit of endurance when she was suddenly disturbed by a long and piercing wail.

It must have come from a near place, and was articulate at first. She heard distinctly the words 'I am killed—ld'. But the succeeding sounds were incoherent, and ended in a long drawn groan which slowly died away. It was all so quick and sudden.

Alamelu jumped to her feet, and even before she could get into the street by opening the door, there were yells and shouts of people racing in all directions. The running men did not care to answer her queries but bounded past by her. She could see that a big crowd was collecting before Meenakshi's house, which was five houses up the street. There were uproarious shouts and wild gesticulations. So closing the door again, she

hastened towards the crowd, and finding old Kuppan therein, she eagerly asked him for the news.

"Oh, Alamelu, there has been a murder in Mayandi's house!" said the old man spreading out his hands.

"Wha—wha—what do you mean? Ma—Ma—Mayandi himself has been murdered," said stammering Chellan, correcting him.

"Mayandi murdered! Oh Lord!" cried Alamelu, striking her mouth with both hands.

"What has the world come to? In all my life there has never been a murder in our village," said old Kuppan.

"What about Mari Goundan?" asked some one irreverently.

"He did nothing in our village," retorted the old man.

"But who murdered Mayandi and why?" demanded Alamelu.

"If only we knew that, there would be no need for so many of us to wander about," said Kannan brushing past her with two or three men.

Alamelu was not satisfied with second hand information. She wanted to get at the very truth of the matter. So she tried to push her way into the house, but found it impossible. The way was barred by a number of angry men, most of whom were strangers to her. Evidently, they were guests who had been invited to the marriage. She again fell to questioning the people about her. Persistently applying to the one or the other, she learnt that Mayandi, who had been keeping awake till a very late hour, on account of the preparations for the marriage on the morrow, had gone to the backyard before retiring to bed, when he was set upon and fatally stabbed by an unknown assailant.

Death was instantaneous. The murderer could not be traced. His only exit was through the dry stubble land which could offer no clue to his movements. Alamelu was in a way glad that she could not see the victim. From the description of his wounds, she was sure that she could not stand the gruesome sight, and with a sad heart she turned towards home. The whole village seemed to have wakened up. There were groups of people here and there, talking about the incident. One such group in front of a ruined dwelling, four or five houses down the street, was discussing the question in rather a vehement manner. Alamelu

opened the door and was about to go in, when some words fell on her ears and made her heart leap into her mouth.

"I am sure it was Velan who did it," Thathan was asserting. "With my own ears, I heard him telling Arumugam that his billhook was thirsting to test its sharpness on Mayandi's neck."

"Perhaps that is why we don't see him anywhere now," said somebody.

"Probably he is sleeping in his house," said another.

"I am sure he is not. You can go and see if you care," asserted Thathan.

Alamelu was shivering from head to foot. She felt as if all the devils in the world were chasing to possess her and her escape depended on getting into the house instantly and bolting the door—which she did with a tremendous bang. With a fluttering heart, she waited to see if she was still being pursued. But she was not.

With the relief from immediate danger, her mind returned to its normal function. But thinking proved to be her greatest curse. The full import of what she had heard swooped on her like a huge avalanche. She staggered and dropped down, heart-broken.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ARM OF THE LAW

It was not yet dawn. But it was fast approaching. The grey mist had almost cleared, and light had sufficiently improved to make objects clear. Busy farmers were on their way to their farms, and some had even begun work. Thathan's betel leaf plantation was somewhat out of the way, and he had to cross many fields and runnels too, before he could reach it. While he was crossing one of the runnels, he came upon a man who was washing himself therein a few yards further up. It was not an unusual sight, particularly in the mornings. But what attracted his attention was the man's curious conduct in rinsing, and tearing away bits of cloth from, his none too big dhoti. So he approached him—and recognized Velan! His cloth was full of blood stains, which he was trying to remove with frantic efforts. And when he looked at Thathan, his expression was the silliest

that one could imagine. His lips seemed to be full of words and yet he could not speak. With a great difficulty, he managed to say or rather murmur, "These stains won't go."

"Blood stains are not so easily got rid of," observed Thathan, and briskly proceeded to his plantation, but only to run back to the village by a different way.

Thathan was a sensation monger. In fact, he thrived on it. He believed that he would be doing the most laudable thing, by giving the widest publicity to what he had seen. To run to Mayandi's house and apprise his people of the whereabouts of Velan was only the work of a few minutes to him. He so graphically described his discovery of Velan's guilt, that the mourning and wailing assemblage with one voice called for the murderer's head. But some one suggested that to take the law into their own hands would be fraught with serious consequences. Instead of subjecting the murderer to punishment, they would themselves be courting heavy penalties. Another cautioned that capturing a desperate character—and a murderer at that—was not so easy as they thought. He was sure to be armed with deadly weapons, and would take a toll of lives before he would surrender him. There were few among them who were so

far carried away by their emotions as to desire to give chase to the culprit at once.

Of course, Mallan was seething with vengeance. But he dreaded to face Velan in his murderous mood—even with a large following. Some other man stated that he had heard a rumour that Velan had taken an oath that he would decimate the entire family of Mayandi, and then surrender himself to the police. This piece of news, whether authentic or otherwise, only strengthened Mallan's resolve to avoid meeting him. Information had already been sent to the Police outpost at Palli, above five miles away, which prided itself over other villages in its possession of a Government dispensary and a sub-magistrate's court. And now, Mallan again deputed two men to run post haste to that place and bring the police along with them.

This was all that he did. Thathan was disappointed. He assured Mallan that Velan didn't appear to be so dangerous. It was true he had his billhook with him, but he certainly did not look ferocious.

"You don't know him half so well as I do," said Mallan, and began to busy himself with the funeral preparations. Whereupon Thathan, with

a 'tush', left the place. But he wasn't going to give up a promising situation so easily. He spread the news to one and all in the village, and he proposed to some that they should go and "tush" Velan.

But as he was more or less a maniac, obsessed by his own craze for sensation, he failed to take note of the general feeling in the village, which was one of unbounded sympathy for Velan and his parents. Indeed, when he repeated the suggestion of capturing Velan, one of Velan's friends pulled him by his tuft, and bade him mind his own business. And when in great resentment, he turned upon the unmannerly intruder, another young man tripped him, and it needed all the agility of his hands to save himself from prostration in the dust. The urchins and young people about roared with laughter. Thathan was unbearably chagrined. He was in a great fury. He was doubtful as to who had tripped him, and he abused him in the most filthy language. Whereupon a dozen men closed in on him, some with mock threats, and some in good earnest.

"You fool, have you no other business but to gossip about other people's affairs?" said one.

"You rascal of a busybody, do you want to gloat over other people's misery?" said another.

"Pull him again by his tuft," cried a youngster, and somebody in the crowd loyally responded.

"Do trip him," begged an urchin, and a young fellow very obligingly attempted to do it, but was checked and reproved by the elders.

While Thathan was being ragged in this manner, Alamelu was wringing her hands in despair and sobbing her heart out. Thanks to Thathan's propaganda, she had learnt quickly all about the morning's incidents. Her husband was yet unaware of the tragedy that had overtaken the house. She did not know how to carry the news to him. How could she? Her heart sank within her. At one time, she felt like running and jumping into the well in the backyard. At another, she was oppressed by a nauseating giddiness, as if a giant had taken hold of her by her hair and was madly whirling her round him. But all the time, her heart was sending out prayers to God. What would they do to her dearest Vel? Would they hang him? Oh, Lord, how could she survive him? She would die and her husband also would die, and the destruction would be complete. Who had cursed them to this fate? She would go as far as her husband's room to convey the dreadful news to him, then falter and retrace her steps to the front

door. In this way, she was restlessly moving to and fro, her eyes full of tears and her heart full of agonies.

A few friends who had come to console her on hearing the sad news were in effect only augmenting her misery. While she was in this pitiable condition, with not a soul who could really console her, Madurai and Veerappan arrived. At sight of them, Alamelu broke out into loud lamentations and wept bitterly holding her head in her hands. Madurai tried to console her, while Veerappan stood mute.

"Don't give way, sister. Have you forgotten that the darkest hour is before dawn? I am sure that everything will end well, and Vel will come out unhurt.—Does he know?" he gently enquired, pointing to Venkatachalam's room.

"He does not. Oh, how could I bring myself to tell him? Though he has called me several times, I have not gone to him. Oh, I simply haven't the courage to tell him," she wailed.

"Don't, don't, sister. It will be all for the best," said Madurai, and noiselessly tiptoed to Venkatachalam's room, accompanied by Veerappan. Alamelu slowly followed them with trembling limbs. Madurai halted near the doorway.

Venkatachalam was lying on his right side and his face was averted. He seemed to be in deep thought and was murmuring, "Thy will be done, Thy will be done."

It looked as if he had a premonition of the coming danger. The fact was that the noise and clamour in the small hours of the night had left some vague and uneasy impressions on his mind. He had no idea of what it was all about, but he was certain that it foreboded something evil. And strangely enough, his wife, always so alert and considerate, had not responded to his call—which fact increased his apprehension.

As Venkatachalam showed no signs of turning to them, Madurai gently spoke to him.

Venkatachalam quickly turned and gazed at them. His looks travelled from the one to the other till they rested on the tell-tale face of his wife.

"What is wrong?" he demanded in a tone of consternation.

"Mayandi is no more. He has been murdered!" said Madurai softly.

"Murdered! When?—why?—who murdered him?" cried Venkatachalam.

"They say it was some time about midnight, when he was alone in his backyard. Nobody saw the murderer, but some busybodies have started a rumour, a most diabolical lie, that Vel did it," said Madurai with great conviction.

"What!" thundered the prostrate man. "Vel to murder Mayandi! Which scoundrel dared to say that? My boy could not hurt an ant!—Where is Vel? He has gone out? Well, let him come home and I will ask him to teach those rascals a lesson.—Oh, Madurai, and you too, Veerappa, how do *you* allow such evil-speaking to go unchecked? Have I not this much claim on you? Because we have become poor, is it fair, is it just, that we should be accused of everything?" he pleaded pitifully.

Just then, there was a tremendous commotion as if a noisy mob had collected before the house and were battering the closed door. Madurai and Veerappan rushed out of Venkatachalam's room, followed by Alamelu, and were stupefied to find Velan before them, almost naked, with just a tiny piece of cloth to cover his shame. The moment Velan saw them, he cried out for a dhoti. "Oh, Uncle, do give me your upper cloth," he begged and Veerappan instantly threw it to him. Wrapping it round him, he began a tirade against the

villagers. "What unfeeling wretches are our people, Uncle? Because I was almost naked, I was anxious to get home without being seen by anybody, but they wouldn't let me alone. They hunted me like a fox, and I had to run the race of my life to get into the house and bolt the door on them."

Madurai and Veerappan stood silent, while Alamelu wept over him as if she had missed him for years. Meanwhile, the battering at the door grew more and more vehement, and then suddenly the door gave way.

The crowd made a mighty din. Somebody was shouting in a stentorian voice, "Make way for the police, make way for the police."

The uproar was not lost on Venkatachalam. He shouted for Madurai, Veerappan and his wife. But nobody seemed to heed him. He was writhing in impatience to know the cause of such tremendous uproar. He tried madly to get out of bed, but his legs would not bear his weight. So he rolled down from the cot, falling heavily on his shoulder. Then he crawled painfully out to the open courtyard. His dramatic appearance synchronised with the arrival of a police officer and his two assistants, who kept back the crowd by violently pushing them away.

"Oh, Father, how you have hurt yourself! Why did you come here?" said Velan, running to him and lifting him up.

"Don't mind me, Vel. Why have these officers come?"

"This is your son, I suppose," said the police officer. "Well, I have to do a painful duty. I have to arrest him."

"Arrest me!" said Velan, throwing back his head and challenging him. "What for?"

"For the murder of Mayandi!"

There was a tense silence. The noisy crowd had at once grown quiet. Venkatachalam was shivering in Velan's hands. Velan did not answer for a minute or so. Then he said, "I only *intended* to murder him."

"How long have you been planning this murder?"

"I never planned anything. Only yesterday evening, I thought of killing him," he said.

"Why did you intend this?"

"Why should I tell you?" answered Velan deprecatingly.

"Why? What do you mean? You have got to answer my questions, man," said the officer authoritatively, his hitherto kind voice becoming harsh and intimidating. Velan felt as if he would choke. The remembrance of the previous day's events harrowed his soul.

"I don't know what you will gain by prying into another man's misery," said Velan in great affliction. "That man was the cause of our ruin. He aimed at driving us out of the village. I didn't care what happened to *me*. But for the sake of my father, I was anxious to prevent him from doing us mischief. So I suggested something to my father, knowing full well that he was dead against it, and then—" Velan stopped. He was breathing heavily and struggling for speech. The officer nodded his head, awaiting further enlightenment.

"You want everything, everything?" cried Velan.

"Everything, my dear man. The law insists," said the officer calmly.

"Well, I advised my father to sell all his lands to escape ruin—and God knows I did it only for his sake, but—but he mistook it and accused me of ingratitude, and said something more that

broke my heart. Yes, but for that vile creature, my beloved father would not have spoken those words. They were too much for me. They reminded me that I was just a stranger in his house. They made me feel like a worm, and I grieved for having been born. Oh, why do you want to make me think of all this?" he begged pathetically, on the brink of tears.

"Steady, steady, young man.—What does he mean by 'ingratitude', 'being a stranger', and all that?" said the officer, turning to Madurai, who explained to him in a few words the relationship of Velan to Venkatachalam.

"I see," said the officer meditatively. "And so—" he gently prompted, again turning to Velan.

"And so," repeated Velan listlessly. "And so, I was mad with rage, and as that devil was the cause of it all, I resolved to do away with him. But honestly, I tell you I didn't kill him."

The officer smiled pityingly.

"Then how do you account for the blood stains on your cloth, which you have taken care to tear to pieces?" he asked.

Velan was unmistakably embarrassed.

"I—I really don't know," he faltered.

“ Well, young man, your case is peculiar, and the law may be somewhat lenient with you. Here, Ibrahim, have the body removed to the Station Hospital for the postmortem. And now, you must come with me,” said the officer, beckoning to Velan.

“ Why ? ” protested Velan.

“ No questions, young man,” said the officer sternly.

“ Sir, sir, do let him alone. Take me in his place. I am the real sinner—I am the murderer. At least take me along with him. Oh, sir, I beseech you, I am the real offender.—All the blame is on me,” begged Venkatachalam, clasping his hands in prayerful attitude.

The officer looked back. “ If there is need, you too will be taken,” he said curtly and went out.

Alamelu rolled on the ground and wept bitterly, beating her head with her hands. Then she tried to run after Velan. But Madurai gently prevented her.

“ Sister, do calm yourself. You are a woman, and they will drive you away. I will go with Vel. Do you think I will desert the boy now? I promise that I will not return without him. Now

your duty is to Venkatachalam. He needs all your care. Go to his help, go to him at once. Oh, look there! He is about to fall into a fit," he cried, pointing to Venkatachalam.

Alamelu rushed to her husband and Madurai hurried away to follow the police and their prisoner.

Venkatachalam *had fallen* into a fit. He was in the throes of a terrible convulsion, and was foaming at the mouth. Veerappan sprinkled cold water on his face. Another thrust a key in his fingers, believing that the contact with iron would stop the fit.

Alamelu was sobbing aloud and one of her friends forcibly closed her mouth and bade her be quiet.

"Is this your fortitude, Alamelu? You will kill him by your weakness," she gently remonstrated.

Venkatachalam's spasm slowly died down and left him so exhausted that he could not open either his eyes or his lips, and but for his deep breathing there was no sign of life in him.

Veerappan and some friends bore him into his room, gently placed him on his bed, and with great concern watched over the prostrate and unconscious figure.

CHAPTER XVII

A BURNT OFFERING

It was a quarter of an hour or so, before Venkatachalam became conscious. He slowly opened his eyes and scanned the kind faces around him. Memory returned to him with lightning suddenness, and he began to wail pathetically.

"Oh, where is Vel? Where have they taken my beloved boy? What are they going to do to him? Oh, Veerappa, where is he? Can't you bring him back to me? I will pay any price, anything they want from me. Ah, Madurai is a clever man. He can do something—where is he? Oh, Veerappa, how can he forsake me now?"

"Madurai will never forsake you, Venkatachalam. He has gone with Vel to take care of him and bring him back, as quickly as possible. And I am here to stand by you. Don't be downhearted. I feel no doubt of Vel's release. The law will certainly come to his rescue. Did

anybody see him doing the deed? What proof is there that it was he who committed it? The judge will not be influenced by the cock and bull stories of hirelings. Do we not know Mari Goundan's case? No, no; believe me, Venkatachalam, for want of proof, the case is sure to fail. The only person who can bear witness is the dead man himself — and of course, dead men tell no tales."

"You are right, perfectly right, my dear Veerappa. You are always thoughtful and wise. Without you and Madurai, I don't know what I would do!" he said, holding out his hands like a helpless child.

Once again, he looked around him. Besides Veerappan and his wife, there were only Pichai and Jambulingam, Velan's bosom friends. He lowered his voice to a whisper and asked, "Do you believe he can have done it?"

Veerappan shook his head dubiously. "God only knows," he said spreading his hands solemnly.

"He was such a good boy — so full of thought for others that, for the life of me, I can't understand how he worked himself up to that state," said Venkatachalam in a tone of musing.

"But he was always sensitive and I drove him mad by my anger. Yes, it was I that drove

him mad. I that made him kill Mayandi. God in Heaven! it is my crime. I am the murderer—not only a murderer but a traitor too! Oh, Lord! what have I done? How shall I atone for it? Oh, Veerappa, is this the way I fulfil Appavu's trust? — By taking charge of his child in his swaddling clothes, bringing him up like a prince, and then delivering him to the scaffold! Veerappa, Vel *must* be saved and nothing must be left to chance. I will give up all I have, even my life. I can see Appavu's ghost mocking at me and accusing. — Yet, what right has he to accuse me? Does he believe that he loves Vel more than I? Is his sorrow greater than mine? Oh! who can understand my trouble?—Oh, vel! Vel! if you had only known what I would suffer!" he moaned, shuffling his hands in utter despair.

"Don't lose heart, Venkata. There is absolutely no need at all to worry. Vel's acquittal is quite sure. If even with some proofs, Mari Goundan could escape, cannot Vel with no proofs at all?" said Veerappan encouragingly.

"You are right, Veerappa. But we must not grudge expense. We must get the best lawyer and be sure of the result beforehand. — Have you forgotten what a lot Mari Goundan spent?"

"But his case was different, Venkata. There were several people who actually saw what happened and he had to buy their silence. Here nobody knows what happened."

"No, no; we mustn't take any risks, Veerappa. We have no need to bribe anybody, but engage the best lawyer we must. And will you do me a favour?" begged Venkatachalam.

"Oh, what a question, Venkata! Is there anything I will not do for you?"

"You know Vel had been to the Kusappatti Kangani to raise money?" Veerappa nodded. "I understand he has some regard for me. He wanted to buy my lands and was even willing to pay a fancy price for them. Now, I want you to go to him at once and tell him that I am willing to sell outright all my lands to him — everything, even the 'Snail Farm.' Vel told me he was a generous man and I am sure he will help us. Do let him know of my troubles and convince him that all that he pays will be spent for Vel's release. Or shall we bargain this way, Veerappa? He may take all the lands and in return, bring off Vel's release somehow or other.

In these days, is there anything that money cannot do? Clever lawyers juggle with justice as

they please. Have we not seen how the law triumphed over justice in Mari Goundan's case? So throw all the responsibility on the Kangani and I am sure he will not shirk it. Vel spoke very highly of his good nature and I have no doubt of his liking for Vel. Do run to him at once," begged Venkatachalam.

"Now? I will certainly go in a little while. You have not yet quite recovered from the fit, and I don't want to be away from you for some hours."

"You are mistaken, Veerappa. I am quite all right, and your going will make me feel better. Do take some food and start at once," he appealed.

"I shall stay here till you return, Father. I can be of some service to auntie too," said Valli, who had slipped into the room unnoticed.

"Oh, my child, you have come?" said Venkatachalam turning to her. "Sit by me, dear—here, still nearer," he said motioning to her, and taking her hands, held them tight.

Often, more things are said by silence—and more effectively too, than by the spoken word. He read her face like an open book. He was never

a strong man, and now he was worse than ever. His old wounds were opened again and his quivering lips betrayed the intensity of his suffering. He tried in vain to control himself and closed his eyes, but he could not check the tears which rolled in silence over his cheeks.

Veerappan sniffed uncomfortably and left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BURDEN OF DISPROOF

Sad disappointment awaited Veerappan at Kusappatti ; for the Kangani had left the village that very morning for Ceylon where he had some tea gardens. Nor would he return for another month. ~~It~~ was very bad. He had set great store by the Kangani's help, and now the task of saving Velan was much more uncertain. He was concerned more for the sake of Velan than Venkatachalam — Not that he did not love Venkatachalam, but the poor boy's case was pitiable from every point of view. He made up his mind that, if by God's grace, Velan was acquitted, he would not stand between him and his daughter. Yes, he would never more allow himself, to be browbeaten by his wife. The foolish woman ! she seemed to care more for her daughter's maintenance than her wedded happiness. He knew beyond doubt ~~that~~ Valli could not love any other but Velan ; and ~~was~~ he to thwart his child's

happiness? Was wealth so stable as his wife thought? To think of Venkatachalam coming to that state!

Oh, no; nothing would stop him from fulfilling the heart's desire of his child. And did he not love Vel too? The dear boy! if he had had a son, he could not have loved him better. But what was the use of thinking of his love for him? How to save him! That was the only question now. He sincerely believed that money was the deciding factor in his release. Good lawyers would demand huge fees, and without good lawyers, the case could not be won. He could not think of any source from which he could raise the necessary funds. Approaching Meenakshi would be like a criminal seeking the policeman's protection. He was sore perplexed and was unwilling to return home with empty hands. The sun was very hot, and he felt very weary. He was sure that a cool dip in one of the deep irrigation wells with which the village abounded, would do him good. So he sought a big one on the outskirts of the village, and after resting for a while in the alluring shade of the trees that were planted all around it, he took a plunge into it. The relief to his mind and body was wonderful. All his cares and worries melted away with the contact of the cold water, and at first he was lost in sheer luxury of sensation.

Then, as he lay still, his recreated mind reverted to its problem.

Scheme after scheme presented itself to him — only to be turned down as useless. Then, as if by inspiration, it occurred to him that he might apply to Mari Goundan for help. Not for money, of course. Poor old man! he was himself dependent on his grandson. But he knew a lot about murder trials. Not merely had he been through the ordeal himself, but it was an open secret that, in the hectic period of his life, he had abetted many crimes. It was true that he had escaped from the clutches of the law, thanks to brilliant lawyers, whom he paid lavishly. But he could not escape the pangs of remorse. In the evening of his life, he lived like a hermit in a small hut underneath an old banyan tree, nearly a mile away from all habitations. He rarely went far from his hut, and excepting his grand-daughter, who daily paid him a visit with a morsel of food, people seldom took the trouble to meet him. His only occupation was smearing his forehead with ashes now and then and murmuring prayers, and while not praying, he made cigars out of the dead banyan leaves scattered all around him, and smoked them away, with eyes staring at the vacant space before him. Rumour had it that he had even developed strange powers.

He was just the man to be approached for advice, and Veerappan, giving his wet body a few quick brushes with his upper cloth, set out towards Mari Goundan's hut in great spirits.

The old man heard him in patience. The news of the murder had already been given to him by his grand-daughter, but she had not known so many details as Veerappan. He stroked his bushy beard and said slowly, "Vel will surely get his acquittal. I see it clear as day. Poor Venkatachalam! he has much to suffer." But it was not for mere prophecy that Veerappan had gone to him.

"You are very kind, Uncle. But I have got a doubt. You know that Venkatachalam is very poor, and he can't engage a lawyer to defend Vel. Now should we not instruct the boy what he ought to say, when he is examined before the judge? We should see that he says nothing which will incriminate him. Will they allow us to see him in jail? If so, I can go to the District Headquarters, and coach him up in any way you advise," said Veerappan.

Mari Goundan smiled. "Don't worry. In any murder trial, if the accused is a pauper, the Government never allows him to go undefended. They engage a lawyer at their own expense for his benefit, unless he prefers to argue his case himself.

You can certainly interview Vel, and as for the coaching, the lawyer will do it better. The only thing to do is to deny the crime, deny it from the beginning to the end, yes, go on denying and denying—but you cannot deny it before God,” said the old man, his tone suddenly becoming solemn.

“No, certainly not. The helpless dead is no longer your victim. He turns aggressor and torturer. The judge may have pretended to save you, but nobody can save you except the Lord Himself in His boundless mercy!” said the old man tremulously.

The talk had raked up his memory, causing him great distress, and Veerappan was loth to continue it further. So hastily thanking him, he abruptly took leave of the old man. But it was a long time before the unpleasant effect of Mari Goundan’s words would wear away.

However, what a promising turn the affair seemed to have taken! With a lawyer to defend him, Vel’s acquittal was beyond doubt. And there was no more need for him to search for money so desperately. Further, the sale of lands was not an easy affair. There were so many preliminaries to be gone through before the sale could be effected, and he was glad that he had escaped all that nuisance. Above all, he was immensely gratified

that he was spared the unpleasant task of negotiating for the sale. Some day, Venkatachalam himself might turn round and find fault with him. It was true that the lands were doomed to be auctioned and appropriated by Meenakshi—only there must be some delay on account of Mayandi's death. But yet, why should he make himself the scapegoat?

Immersed in these thoughts, he moved on automatically, and he did not know that he was within a few yards of the village, till Arumugam, the prince of toppers in the village, addressed him. "Veerappa, I have brought round that ass, Thathan," he said triumphantly. Veerappan stopped short. He was not able to understand what Arumugam was alluding to.

"I don't catch you," he said helplessly, trying to collect his scattered thoughts.

"You don't? What a fool you are! Thathan is the only witness who can help the police in their case against Vel. If he lets them down, the entire case will topple down like a house of cards."

"Oh, you mean *that*. You are quite right. What a captial fellow you are! That idea never struck me. Why, Vel's case is as good as won.

You know Vel is to be defended by a lawyer. Yes; if an alleged murderer is too poor to engage a vakil, the Government does it for him. I am just returning from Mari Goundan and he is positive about it. Well, if there is any man amongst us who knows anything about law, it is he; don't you think so? Oh, Arumugam, what a godsend for Vel! A lawyer to defend him, and no witness for the prosecution!" said Veerappan, scarcely able to contain himself.

"God be thanked! The boy deserves all the help in the world. I tell you, excepting a wretch or two, the whole village is praying for his success. And mind you, that fellow Thathan was not so easy to tackle. But the men made it clear to him that if he refused to help Vel, he could not hide his skin anywhere. And one," said Arumugam lowering his voice, "went so far as to say that he would share Mayandi's fate. The people are in a temper, and Thathan knows it."

"It is all the Lord's favour," said Veerappan, fervently squeezing Arumugam's hands, and hurried away to Venkatachalam's house.

Venkatachalam found it hard to believe Veerappan's statements. In his overwrought condition, not only did he consider the sudden

departure of the Kangani from his village as an additional misfortune but also as an evil omen.

But Veerappan's optimism and enthusiasm were contagious and his sincerity convincing, and by and by Venkatachalam was prevailed upon to see things in a more cheerful light—but not before Veerappan had promised him that he would go to the District Headquarters to work along with Madurai.

Once the thing was decided, Venkatachalam wanted him to leave for the town at once. But Veerappan convinced him that there was no need for such a hurry. Before being committed to the sessions at the District Court, the boy must be put up before the sub-magistrate at Valli for a sort of preliminary trial. Of course, the proceedings would only be formal, but they had to be gone through, and they would take a day or two. This time he wanted to utilize for more consultations with Mari Goundan. Further, he knew that Mari Goundan had a friend in town, a lawyer's tout, to whom he used to send presents often. He was sure that a letter to him from Mari Goundan would be of great use. The real trial would be at the Sessions, and to cheer up the boy there was Madurai near him.

Using some such arguments, Veerappan proposed to leave the village only after two or three days, and he made up his mind that Valli should stay with Venkatachalam and his wife during his absence.

But Lakshmi was against such a proposal. She remonstrated with her husband. Such a step would involve them in a serious misunderstanding with Meenakshi. But a strange and unusual glint in her husband's eyes quelled her, and for the first time in her life she felt that she could not deal with him as she liked. As for her daughter, she had always been a rebel, and now she made no secret of her intentions regarding her marriage.

"I tell you, Mother, I will never agree to marry Mallan," she said emphatically.

"Ah, foolish girl, but for this tragedy, you would already be his for life," said Lakshmi.

"It is not I that am foolish, Mother," said Valli smiling. "Now I confess to you that I had planned to go mad—yes, feign madness—just before the ceremony and claw and bite anybody who dared to approach me. It was a plan agreed to by me and Vel, and now, I tell you that if God does not restore Vel to me, you will not be able even to trace my corpse to marry it to Mallan."

“ Oh Valli! Valli! can't you see why I advise you? Don't I love my own child? ” said Lakshmi in great grief.

“ Yes; but you love Mallan's money more, ” said Valli sadly, and went away to make preparations for her father's journey.

On the morning of the fourth day after Mayandi's death, Veerappan armed himself with a letter from Mari Goundan, and took leave of Venkatachalam, advising him to be of good cheer and fear nothing. He promised to write to him every second day about the progress of the case.

After walking sixteen miles, he reached the Golden Crag at about mid-day. There were many bullock carts in the shade of the trees at the foot of the hill. It was then that he remembered the important weekly fair at Puttur. The carts were returning from the fair laden with commodities and were on their way to the town. These caravans travelled only by night, and, halting at convenient places, rested during the heat of the day. Though fully loaded, every cart took one or two passengers who had to accommodate themselves as best they could amidst the bags of grain.

It was true that there was a lot of jolting, but the rough villagers were used to such travelling and they even managed to sleep soundly.

Veerappan selected the cart with the smallest load and arranged for a berth with the cartman, the fare being only two annas for a distance of twenty miles or so. Then he took the food he had brought with him, and lay down to rest for a while.

After nightfall, the caravan of bullock carts started on their slow journey to the town, doing not more than two miles an hour. Lying on the uneven surface of the bags of rice, Veerappan made himself as comfortable as possible by squeezing his body and limbs. He could not sleep for a long time, not because of the discomfort of his bed, but on account of the thoughts that were rushing through his mind about the success of his mission. But the tired body eventually asserted itself, and even while he was in the middle of a plan, he dropped asleep.

When he woke up, it was already daybreak. The eastern sky was suffused with the bright red rays of the rising sun, which glowed like a huge semicircular ball of fire on the horizon. Stretching his cramped legs, he got down from the slow moving cart. The town was barely a mile away, and he preferred to walk the distance. The rural scene was still around him. There were fields on either side of the road, and a small stream

near by. He wanted to make his morning ablutions before going into the town. He never had liked life in a town, and he wanted to postpone contact with its unnatural arrangements as long as possible.

When he arrived at the town, he proceeded straight to the Rajah's choultry near the Perumal Temple. It was the usual lodge of his fellow-villagers during their stay in the town. And sure enough, there was Madurai, sitting in the corner of the long pial, cleaning his teeth with a twig.

Madurai was taken aback by the sudden and unexpected appearance of Veerappan. But Veerappan quickly allayed his fears and explained to him the purpose of his visit. Madurai was very glad to have an experienced man to consult with. For he complained that though he contrived to be often in Velan's company up to Palli, he found it impossible to see the boy at the District Jail. The officials were so strict.

The two then went in search of Mari Goundan's friend, and after a good deal of trouble succeeded in finding his house.

The vakil's tout seemed to be a man of good disposition. He made very kind enquiries about Mari Goundan's welfare, and made no secret of the gains he had derived from him. He told them that

it would be some weeks before the case was taken up. And for old time's sake, he promised to do his best for them. He was even so far carried away by his reminiscences as to suggest—without the required consultation with his wife—that they might stay with him till the trial was over. Too late, he noticed the infuriated face of his wife, who had not missed the last portion of his talk. The lady was sizing him up with contemptuous looks, and her pouting lips seemed to hold back, from a sense of decency, the torrent of abuse the tongue was itching to pour out.

The poor man's eyes were pathetically appealing for mercy. Shrewd Madurai took in the situation at once, and came to his rescue by thanking him for his kindness but excusing himself on the plea that the Rajah's choultry would be more convenient for them on account of its central location. But the tables were suddenly turned in favour of Madurai and Veerappan by the tout's sickly cow which a servant was taking out from some dark corner of the house.

“Whatever is the matter with the poor creature!” exclaimed Madurai, closely looking at the famished animal. “Why, it is suffering from a dreadful disease, and unless you see to it immedi-

ately, the poor thing will certainly die. Do you use its milk?" he asked with great solicitude.

"Yes; but what harm is there?" said the tout's wife, speaking for the first time.

"Well, Madam, we in the villages don't. It is not healthy. You should know that the blood of your cow is poisoned by worms."

"Worms!" said that lady in great astonishment.

"Yes, worms. In the cleft of all her hoofs, you will find them in plenty. But I am sure the disease can still be cured," said Madurai, in a rather condescending way.

"But the milkman who is treating it never said anything about worms. He is an old man and is very experienced," said the lady, as if refuting Madurai.

"Excuse me, Madam. The town folk know litte about cattle—Not that we villagers know everything, but I dare say we know a little more than you. —Here, poor thing," he said, trying to catch hold of one of the cow's forelegs, but the animal would not allow him. Then with the assistance of Veerappan and Suppiah

Pillai (the vakil's tout) he pulled out with a match a worm from one of the hoofs. Mr. Suppiah Pillai's wife was most painfully surprised.

"Not only one, there must be ten more here," said Madurai pointing to the leg.

"Do you know how to cure it?" enquired that lady, stupidly smiling.

"Certainly; and I am going to do so. In what other way can we express our gratitude, Madam?"

"Will she be cured in a month?" she enquired cautiously.

"A month! Why, in a week's time I will rid her of all the worms, and in another week, or perhaps a fortnight, I will make her fat like a temple bull," he promised.

"In that case, I shall not go to my father's house," she said turning to her husband. "I want to see the dear beast completely cured before I go. —I hope it will not be very inconvenient for you to stay here," she said ingratiatingly to Madurai and Veerappan.

"Oh, thank you very much, Madam. But we don't want to be a burden on you. It isn't fair. You need have no fear about the cure of your cow.

What other work have we got here? Here are no lands to look after, no manure to cart, no wells to bale out water from. For me, it is rather hard, Madam. I am a hard working farmer, and I don't know whether sitting quiet and doing nothing will not upset my health." Here Veerappan bit his lip till the blood almost oozed out to restrain himself from bursting into laughter.

"And Master says that the case will not be taken up so soon as we thought. Therefore, beyond cooking our food and spending a few minutes with your cow, I don't see any other work for us but loafing about in the town," said Madurai.

"Oh, no; I won't let you go," said the lady with finality, "You will not be a burden. Well, I am not going to prepare food for the two of you separately. Instead of cooking half a measure of rice in a small pot, I may have to cook half a measure more in a bigger pot. That is all. Besides, if you stay here my husband will remember what he has to do for you. I tell you he is very absent minded, and you—and I too—must remind him often," she said blandly smiling.

"Oh, is that what you mean, Madam? I quite agree. Out of sight means out of mind. Well, Veerappa, we dare not refuse such kindness," said Madurai, and covertly winked at him.

CHAPTER XIX

PREPARING FOR THE TRIAL

A week passed and two; and still nothing definite was known about the date of hearing. Mr. Suppiah Pillai, the vakil's tout, was of opinion that Vel's case was a peculiar one, involving very little business. There were very few witnesses to be examined, and he was sure that it would not take up more than a day or two at the most. But all the same, he was very alert, meeting such lawyers as might perhaps be engaged for Velan's defence and expounding to them the details of his case. He also managed to obtain for Madurai and Veerappan an interview with Velan. The boy had changed beyond recognition. He begged for news of his father's welfare. He assured them that there was nothing wrong with his own health. What ailed him was the thought of his helpless father.

"Oh, Uncle, if anything goes wrong, don't forsake my father," said Velan holding Veerappan's chin and bursting into tears. "I don't mind if they hang me. With my death, the world will not come to an end. But what about him!"

"Oh, you are mistaken, Vel," said Madurai. "You are sure to be free in a few days. We have arranged for everything. We are waiting for the date of hearing to be fixed. You have got to repeat like a parrot whatever the lawyer tells you to say and the whole thing is finished. And as for Venkatachalam, he is as spirited as ever, and, excuse me, he will be very sorry for you—and certainly will think very poorly of you—if he sees you like this. So cheer up, Vel; a few days more and you will be going home with us," concluded Madurai, in a matter of fact manner.

Madurai's words of encouragement had a good effect. A new light had appeared on Velan's face, when Veerappan foolishly asked him whether he 'did it'. Madurai frowned and looked daggers at Veerappan. Velan was about to say something, when the warder abruptly ended the interview by pushing him away, remarking that the Superintendent was coming round.

That night Madurai, Veerappan and Suppiah Pillai put their heads together to draft a very agree-

able and convincing letter to Venkatachalam. Vee-rappan's schooling had stopped with learning how to sign his name, and Madurai, for all his cleverness, could only read and that with great difficulty. Writing was almost impossible for him and if he did write anything with great labour, it could not be deciphered by anybody else. So the letter had to be penned by Suppiah Pillai, though it was mostly to Madurai's dictation.

"Oh, you are dragging in my name also," said Thayammal smiling, who, thanks to the fast improving health of her cow, had become one of their powerful allies.

"Madam, I feel it my duty to write to my friend about you. We can never forget your kindness. I am honest," said Madurai. Then turning to Suppiah Pillai, he continued "If you won't write that, sir, I shall do so myself. I only fear that I will have to sit at it for a long time, and even then, nobody will be able to read it."

And Madurai was sincere. He had come to know that Thayammal was a most generous woman, her one defect being that her husband should not do anything without obtaining her sanction beforehand.

Whereupon, Suppiah Pillai watered down Madurai's dictation a bit.

A few days later, Suppiah Pillai got definite information regarding the date of hearing. The lawyer selected for Velan's defence was a brilliant junior advocate with whom Suppiah Pillai was not acquainted. So he got himself introduced to him by one of his friends, and putting him in possession of all the facts relating to Velan's case, appealed to him to take a personal interest in the matter.

The young lawyer laughed.

"I am surprised that a man of your experience should speak like this. When I take up a case, I ally myself with my client. Considerations weigh with me not after accepting a case, but before taking it up. So you needn't worry. I am quite confident that your friend will get through."

"There is only one witness who can be of some use to the Prosecution—the man who saw the boy cleaning the blood stains. Him also we are trying to win over to our side," said Suppiah Pillai.

"Never mind him. Let him say what he pleases. I shall see that his evidence will not avail. Your man will escape. Don't worry. But I must

have a talk or two with him soon. I suppose he will have sense enough to confide in me."

"What doubt is there, sir? He is a very good boy. Two of his relatives, to whom he is devoted, are staying with me. If you think they will be helpful at the interview, I shall ask them to accompany you," said Suppiah Pillai.

"Certainly they will be helpful. Bring them to me to-morrow afternoon, precisely at four o'clock. Well, there is nothing more I believe?—good morning," he dismissed him abruptly and busied himself with a pile of papers before him.

There was discussion among Veerappan, Madurai, and Suppiah Pillai whether the date of hearing should be intimated to Venkatachalam or not. Veerappan was not for this. He was afraid that the news would cause him great anxiety. But Suppiah Pillai was of opinion that it would not be fair to withhold that fact from him, but they should so sugar it as to make it palatable for him—which was done accordingly.

The next evening, the young advocate managed to take Madurai and Veerappan along with him to the Penitentiary, and made it clear to them on the way that he needed their presence, just to put

himself in friendly relations with Velan. That was all.

They were not to disturb his conversation with him on any account, as thereby they might distract Velan's attention and even nullify the value of the instructions. He requested ~~them~~ not to misunderstand him. With the best of intentions, they might make some suggestions which would confuse the prisoner's mind.

This admonition was much welcomed by Madurai, as it would prevent Veerappan from worrying the boy with his silly questions of "Did you do it?" and so on.

The lawyer put a set of questions to Velan and coached him how he should answer them. He went on drilling him till he was satisfied with the result.

"Now tell me what are the most important points you shouldn't forget," asked the lawyer in conclusion.

"The one about my presence in the channel, and the other about the loss of my clothes," said Velan promptly.

"And how do you explain them?"

"I was cleaning my teeth in the channel early in the morning, just like everybody else. As for the loss of my clothes, it was the work of Mallan who was always afraid that I would seduce Valli, even if she married him. So he hired Thathan and his party to involve me somehow in the murder; and they set upon me, tore off my clothes, belaboured me, and concocted the story that my clothes were drenched in blood.

"Quite right. In a few days, you can go back to your village with your relatives," said the lawyer smiling.

"But really, sir, I don't feel like having done it. I did start from my house with my billhook, but—but—I don't remember anything afterwards. On my way, I got drunk for the first time in my life.—Oh Uncle, does one forget everything done, while in that state?" he asked Madurai, shuffling his hands in great misery. The lawyer motioned Madurai to keep quiet.

"You haven't done it, man. If you talk so foolishly, you will not only kill yourself but your father as well. If you really love your father as you profess, do as I tell you. You have to repeat what I told you just now, word for word, syllable for syllable. Do you want me to go all over it again?" demanded the lawyer.

"No, sir. I will most faithfully follow your advice," said Velan clasping his hands in great humiliation and obedience. Whereupon the lawyer left the place followed by Madurai and Veerappan.

At about three o'clock on the afternoon of the day before the hearing, Veerappan and Madurai were surprised by a visit from Arumugam and some of Velan's friends.

"How did you know that we were here," said Veerappan in great astonishment.

"Is it so difficult?" said Arumugam, implying little regard for Veerappan's understanding. "I go through all your letters to Venkatachalam."

"Well, I suppose Venkatachalam is in good spirits," said Madurai.

"We have done our best to keep him so. But, naturally the approach of the trial has upset him a little. We have promised to tell him the good news within a few hours of the judgment. Some of these boys will run all the thirty six miles to oblige him," said Arumugam pointing to Velan's friends.

"It is very kind of you, Arumugam, to have taken so much trouble," said Madurai.

"You see, I have a sort of feeling that my goading him with drink had something to do with the murder. If that was so, I can never excuse myself if the boy comes to grief," said Arumugam.

"Ah, don't worry. You will see how well everything works out," comforted Madurai.

"Uncle Arumugam has curious notions. He is pining as if he egged on Vel to kill Mayandi! You can't think of anything more ridiculous. —The purpose for which we came here is this, Uncle," said one of the young men turning to Madurai. "Thathan has given us an undertaking that he would say nothing against Vel, but would do his best to help him. We are here to watch his conduct in court. If he misbehaves, he knows what to expect. Yes, uncle," said the young fellow returning Madurai's smile. "We don't mince matters. We mean business. You wrote that there will be only two or three witnesses in all. But there are eight people from the village itself, including Mallan."

"But all of them don't count. The only evidence that can go against us is Thathan's," said Madurai.

"Oh, he dare not let us down. Of course, he is staying with Mallan's party now; but it is

just to get some money from him," said the same young man. X

"Now what about your boarding and lodging? Shall I arrange for you in a hotel close by?" queried Madurai.

"Oh don't worry. We are already fixed up in our usual free home, the Rajah's choultry. I forgot to tell you that we have left some more fellows there who are making preparations for a grand feast. If you want to enjoy really good dinners, you must come and stay with us," invited Arumugam.

"Thank you very much. But I can't afford to be away from Mr. Suppiah Pillai, our guide and helper. Without him we would be nowhere. Even now he has gone out only on our business," said Madurai.

"Quite true. I didn't really mean that you should come. Are we here to eat, drink, and make merry? No, no; you go ahead and attend to what is to be done to-morrow. We know the way to the District Court, and we will arrive there to-morrow long before it opens. Don't wait for us at all," said Arumugam.

"You have forgotten the ghee and the other things, Uncle," said a young man who was in charge of a bulging gunny bag.

"Ah, just like me! My dear fellow, my mind is quite unsettled. Madurai, here is some good ghee from our own village, and a few fresh vegetables too, for Mr. Pillai," said Arumugam, taking the things from the gunny bag.

"It is very thoughtful of you, Arumugam. Madam will be simply delighted," said Madurai and took them in, followed by Arumugam and the rest.

Thayammal's face was wreathed in smiles. "How kind of you! Your village people seem to be all alike. You are so good that I am tempted to visit your village and stay there for some time," she said.

"You are most heartily welcome, Madam. We are poor people, but we will make it up by our hearty hospitality," said Arumugam.

"Oh, money is not everything. These luscious brinjals can't be had in this town either for love or money. Oh, how many kinds! You must have taken a lot of trouble to collect them."

"Not at all, Madam. This is our humble and only way of showing our gratitude to you. I am only sorry that Mr. Suppiah Pillai is not here now. I so want to see such a benevolent gentleman and

pay my respects. I shall come again after supper," said Arumugam.

"Don't trouble yourself, Arumugam. You must be tired after the long journey. Rest for the night, and we shall meet at the court to-morrow morning as we arranged," advised Madurai.

Then Arumugam and his party of young men left for the Rajah's choultry.

CHAPTER XX

THE COURSE OF JUSTICE

On the next morning, Veeramangalam village was well represented in the spacious compound of the District Court. There was brisk and earnest talk among the villagers, which became rather subdued on the arrival of the Court peons.

As soon as the doors of the court were opened, Mr. Suppiah Pillai led in Madurai, Veerappan, Arumugam and the rest, and seated them in the most advantageous place. Mallan and his party followed them and shifted for themselves as best they could. By and by, the Court Room was crowded with lawyers. Exactly at ten o' clock, the judge arrived, and at once all the noise was hushed into silence. All those assembled rose from their seats, and resumed them as soon as the judge had taken the chair.

While the interpreter was placing some papers before the judge, Velan suddenly appeared on the

scene, led in by two policemen. A chorus of sighs escaped the villagers. The judge, casting a deprecating glance in their direction, went on consulting the index of papers prepared by the interpreter.

But Velan's friends were so overcome by his pale and battered appearance that, in their native simplicity, they forgot that they were in the Court, and began to talk to each other. And before Suppiah Pillai could intervene to advise them, the court crier, turned on them with a furious frown and threatened that unless they kept perfect silence and behaved themselves, they would be ejected. The reprimand was too much for the poor fellows, and they at once shrank into their seats sheepishly.

Velan was conducted to the dock by a policeman, where he stood lone and helpless, with a gaze that seemed to look at nothing — as if he were an exhibit for all the world to observe. One soft hearted villager was so much moved as to weep, but his tears were silent and he was at great pains to conceal them.

The first witness summoned for the prosecution was the doctor who had done the postmortem examination on Mayandi's body. He testified to the fact of death, giving descriptions of the wounds, and his evidence was finished quickly.

The next person to be called in was Mallan, who had given the first news of his father's murder to the police.

He was examined at greater length by the Public Prosecutor, and every now and then he insinuated that Velan had always threatened to wreak his vengeance on him and his late father. But when he deposed that, on the night of the murder, the prisoner at the dock had gone to the house of Valli, his bride elect, and taken an oath before her that he would kill her also, along with the entire family of the witness, if she were to marry him, (the witness) Velan could contain himself no longer.

"Oh Lord, it is a horrible lie!" he thundered in a voice that, in spite of all his emaciation, vibrated with indisputable vigour.

"You shouldn't interrupt," said the Judge quietly, taking a new interest in the prisoner before him. "You will be given every chance to say what you want to say," he added.

Mr. Suppiah Pillai glued his eyes on the defending lawyer — as if to enquire whether it was necessary that he should interfere. But the lawyer signed to him not to worry.

The Police Sub-Inspector's turn came next. He narrated a cogent story of the incidents, laying stress on the valuable help rendered to the prosecution by one of the villagers, Thathan.

He also asserted that but for Thathan, to whom the prisoner had to confess his guilt perforce, the crime would never have been brought to light. The Police constable who followed him immediately only corroborated his chief's statement.

Then came Thathan into the witness box. He seemed to be quite uneasy. He was shuffling his limbs awkwardly, and nervously looking about him. When ordered to state what he knew about the murder, he could not say anything connectedly, and answers had to be elicited from him by frequent questions.

The judge often caught his eye wandering from person to person amidst the groups of his fellow-villagers and remarked sternly. "Look here, you are not stating what you actually know about the case. You know what is the punishment for perjury?"

"No, Master."

"Rigorous imprisonment."

"Ah!" said Thathan jumping to his feet and scared out of his wits. "I will speak nothing but

the truth," he promised, but he instinctively felt that several pairs of fierce eyes were fixed on him. He lifted his head and there was Sadayan, the most dangerous of Velan's friends, watching him with the stare of a cobra.

Thathan's knees were knocking against each other. He cursed himself for ever having meddled in the affair. Speaking the truth would mean sharing Mayandi's fate. That turbulent rascal meant business; and speaking falsehood was equally dangerous.—Rigorous imprisonment! God alone knew what its implications were. He had to choose between the frying pan and the fire.

While he was fidgeting in utter misery, the Judge startled him with a question. "When Velan was rinsing his cloth, did you notice blood stains?"

"Yes, er no, your honour; the sap which flows, when we cut a bannana cluster, leaves the same stain, and I don't know, er—I can't say what it really was," he said with great hesitation.

"I don't want your opinion here," said the Judge harshly. "You are trying to suppress the truth. I have warned you already, and if you lie again, I shall send you to jail.—Do you understand? Now answer my question.—Didn't you tell the Police Inspector that Velan had complained to you

that the blood stains 'wouldn't go?'" asked the Judge referring to an exhibit before him.

"Yes, your honour. I forgot, your honour, I most humbly beg your honour to forgive me, I won't do it again, your honour," went on Thathan trembling from head to foot. Meanwhile there was some slight disturbance at the entrance to the Court Room. At first, the Judge took no notice of it, but the commotion became very great and all eyes were attracted to that spot.

The Veeramangalam folk in the Court could not suppress their amazement, which found vent in all sorts of exclamations, and the word 'Cholan' was on the lips of every one of them.

A tall and lean young man with a shaggy head and a bedraggled appearance was defying the authority of the Court Durwan, and even attempting to overpower him. His scanty clothing was so dirty that it was an eyesore to look upon.

"I must get in, you sinner. I must talk to the Judge or else that poor innocent boy will be killed. I want to tell him that it was I that killed my father. You sinner, I killed my father—not he," he cried, gesticulating wildly.

The Judge at once ordered the Durwan to let him in.

"Oh Master, it was I who killed my father. Vel is innocent, and here I am to surrender myself to you for punishment. Hang me, shoot me, or do anything you like to take away my life. It has become most unbearable to me, Master. In one mad moment, I killed him with my own hands. He was bad to me—very bad indeed, but still, I had no right to put an end to his life, and now only my death will atone for *his*. Oh Master, pray, don't let me off," he begged prostrating himself on the ground. All the dignity and solemnity of the Court had fled for the nonce.

There was tense excitement and loud whispers went round among those present. The Judge held a brief consultation with the Public Prosecutor. Once again silence was restored in the twinkling of an eye. Velan was brought down from the dock, and in his place, the confessor was put.

"Well, I doubt if a drama could provide a greater sensation," observed the Judge.

"There is no more vivid drama than life, your honour," said the Public Prosecutor, and proceeded to question the new prisoner.

The prisoner deposed that his name was Cholan, and that he was aged twenty six, and the elder of the two sons of the deceased.

When questioned as to the motive for his crime, he gave a deep sigh and said it was a long story.

"But it is *the* thing that the Court wants to know," said the Public Prosecutor. Cholan tossed his head in great discontent. "I have no objection, Master. I only thought it was needless and tedious. Well, I will make it short."

"But don't omit the facts," warned the Judge.

Cholan smiled deprecatingly. "Why should I, Master? Am I afraid of anything?"

"Say 'your honour,'" admonished the Court interpreter.

"Don't worry. Let him say what he likes. He doesn't mean any disrespect," said the Judge.

"You are right, Master. I am just a labourer, and sometimes a beggar too, and I don't know how to talk. But I don't disrespect anybody. What do I gain thereby?—You want to know why I killed my father?—Well, I killed him because I hated him most bitterly. But I should not have done it. God only knows how I am suffering for it. Yes, Master, I killed him with these hands and what have I gained?—And what

does anybody gain by killing another? Nobody lives for ever; and does anybody die for ever? Death does not remove everything. Yes, Master, death is no end, no end. My father comes to me every night with a sorrowful face, as if he is sorry for me. He comes and goes so quickly that it is all a dream. I can't let him know how my heart aches for what I have done. So I must go to him at once. When I raised this hand to stab him, he recognised me and cried, "you". Why, I can see him before me now crying, "you! you!! you!!!" yelled Cholan, staring wildly before him, and with hands clutching at his woolly head, he sank to his feet in a heap. The policeman tried to lift him, but he was advised not to touch him. The Court attender was instructed to give him a drink, which he sipped listlessly at first, but soon finished at one gulp, and suddenly rose to his feet. For the space of a minute, the Court looked like a perfect dumb show. The silence was gently broken by the kindly voice of the Judge who asked, "Why should you hate your father so much?"

"He was most cruel to me, Master. He drove me out of the house. He vilified me wherever I went. He forced me to starve. He did everything short of killing me. But left to

himself, he would have been a kind father. Why, he was so loving till that wretched woman came into the house," complained Cholan bitterly.

"Who is that woman?" asked the Judge.

"My aunt, Master—my father's elder sister. She is a widow with a large fortune and no children. My people were poor and they gave her in marriage to a very rich but old man. In fact, they say that her husband was so old that he might well have been her grandfather. The old man died within a few years of her marriage, and she came back to live with us with all her riches. I very well remember her coming, veiled in widow's weeds, and making a show of mourning. Soon after her arrival, she began to treat my mother as if she were no better than her slave. Because she had money, and we were poor and badly in need of her help, she thought she could do whatever she liked with us. I was nearly twelve at that time, and I used to abuse her whenever she ill-treated my mother. But my mother, being a very timid woman, patiently put up with every insult, to my utter disgust. I was once so angry that I threw a stone at her.—Yes, Master. Even my father didn't approve of her conduct, but she threatened to go back to her husband's village and adopt one of the sons of her brother-in-law. That threat sealed the

fate of our family. My father was terribly anxious to keep her in the house, and falling in with her wishes one by one, finally became her slave. But she never forgave me. She daily poisoned my father's mind against me by carrying awful tales to him. I admit I had my faults, Master ; but I was not half as bad as she described me. It was she who brought me to this state, Master. But she was a woman, and a foolish widow at that. My father was a man, and it was for him to behave in a manly manner. Instead, by and by, he outdid her in his persecution of me." Here he took a deep breath, as if to rally his second wind. The Judge essayed to question him further, but desisted, noticing that he was about to continue his statement.

"But what roused the devil in me suddenly was the settlement of that fellow's marriage," he said pointing to Mallan. "He is my younger brother, and his marriage was to have been performed last month. After what I did, it fell through. I was not jealous of him, Master — not at all. But in our community, the parents never celebrate the marriage of the younger son, while the elder remains unmarried. If ever they do, they obtain the permission of the elder boy, and if he refuses, a sort of ceremony is gone through. I had no idea

at all of withholding my consent, if they had asked me — though by rights and justice too the girl belongs only to Vel,” he said, pointing to Velan.

“When this question was brought to the notice of my father by the elders of the village, he is reported to have said that he had only one son left, and that his first born, meaning me, had died long ago. I was in the tavern of Ariyamangalam when I heard this piece of news. I was very much irritated. I fancied that I had been most unjustly disgraced. On the top of it all, I had received a week’s wages only that day, and I admit, Master, that I drank heavily. The thought that I had become so insignificant as not to be consulted even in this matter kept on rankling in my mind. I was far from being sober, and I felt that I had been most outrageously insulted. The insult loomed larger and larger. To be considered ‘dead’ while I was hale and hearty! I was suddenly seized by a passion to prove to him that I was not dead but *he*. Ah, Master, I grew mad, and my one idea was how to get at my father and kill him! My mind was dead to everything else. It was late in the night when I reached my village. I waited for him in ambush in all likely places, but I couldn’t meet him. But this only intensified my

resolve. I was not to be deprived of my prey. I was possessed by a devil. I got into the backyard of my house, and hid myself behind a stack of wood.

I had not to wait for long. He did come, alone and utterly ignorant of my presence. The sight of him lashed me into a fury. I grew blood-thirsty, and pounced on him like a tiger and then I—"he stopped, firmly closing his eyes, and making a motion as if he chopped something.

"And so, you admit you killed your father," said the Public Prosecutor.

"What more can I say, Master?" said Cholan, pathetically shuffling his hands.

"How long have you known Velan?" asked the Judge.

"Ever since his birth."

"I suppose you like him?"

"Like is not the word, Master. I love him most dearly. He is one of the best boys I have ever known."

"So you would be glad if he is acquitted?"

"Or else, why should I surrender myself, Master? I am not over fond of my life, and I was

for doing away with myself. But when I heard that poor Vel had been accused, I was horror-stricken. I wanted to give myself up to the Police at once, confessing everything. But an old friend to whom I opened out my heart, advised me to go straight to you, and that is why I came here."

"It is most magnanimous of you to offer your life to save Velan's, but the Law is exacting. It cannot ignore the fact that it was Velan who killed your father," remarked the Judge.

"Oh! you don't believe me, Master! As the Lord is my witness, Vel has nothing to do with my father's death, nothing—absolutely nothing. Oh Master, whatever makes you think of such a horrible thing?"

"When *you* killed your father, why should Velan's dhoti be soaked with blood?" demanded the Judge.

"Ah!—that?" said Cholan, drawing a deep breath and nodding his head. "It must have been this way, Master. I can explain it to you in a minute. After my horrible deed, I felt unbearably thirsty. I was longing for a cool drink. Only water kept in an earthen pot has such coolness. Of course, every house has two or three such pots in summer. But which house could I dare enter?"

I suddenly remembered the tavern. There was always cool water in that shed, and I ran towards it with the billhook in my hand. At its entrance, I stumbled and fell on all fours over the unconscious form of a man. With some difficulty I got to my feet, and pulled out my blood-soaked cloth which had got entangled—”

“I see!” exclaimed Velan so loudly that for a second all eyes were drawn to him.

“The billhook slipped off my hand,” continued Cholan,” and it was a miracle that neither of us was hurt. When I found out that it was Vel I had stumbled over, I could not believe my eyes. He was never in the habit of drinking. This is how his clothes must have been stained, Master. There is no doubt of it,” asserted Cholan.

The Judge held another consultation with the Public Prosecutor. Velan was again put into the box and was subjected to a series of questions. Now that the mist in his brain regarding the mystery of his blood-stained clothes was cleared, he was no longer under any doubt as to his innocence.

He convinced the Court by the unquestionable sincerity of his evidence. To complete the proof of his innocence, the defending lawyer sought the permission of the Court to let in the evidence of

Arumugam. After some pleading, the Judge allowed his examination. Arumugam, though most eager to do his bit for Velan, was in fear and trembling when put into the witness box. Still, he succeeded in drawing upon his head all the blame. "I coaxed him to drink with the best of motives, your honour," he wailed. "I believed I was helping him as well as Mayandi. If I had only known that things would come to such a pass, I would never have poked my nose into the affair. I give my word, your honour, that I will never again interfere with any one," he promised, as a sort of expiation for his misconduct.

The Judge dismissed him at once and entered into his inevitable consultations. It was a strange case involving strange proceedings, and within fifteen minutes after the close of Arumugam's evidence, he passed orders that Velan should be set at liberty, and that Cholan should be remanded to custody. The decision was hailed with universal approval and it needed all the powers of Suppiah Pillai to restrain Velan's friends from open demonstrations.

The moment Velan came out of the Court, he was shouldered by his friends and carried away from the compound. Then followed the most spontaneous demonstration of their love for him.

Every one tried to engage his attention at one and the same time, and he was hugged, patted, and squeezed in such a manner that he would have given anything to escape. But Madurai who did not fail to notice his discomfort, chid them for their foolishness and got him relief. Two of his friends, Jambulingam and Pichai, who were under a promise to travel that very night to convey the good news to Venkatachalam, embraced him once again and took leave of him.

Arumugam provided them with some money and instructed them not to be so foolish as to walk the whole distance, but to engage a jutka which was always available for a run up to the Golden Crag, and then take to walking.

While Velan and his people were lost in the happiness of the occasion, Suppiah Pillai managed to send word to his wife of Velan's release, and asked her to prepare a grand dinner for all of them. The suggestion was not his. In fact, he was under her orders that he should give her timely intimation of Velan's release so as to enable her to prepare a splendid feast.

When the first flush of their emotions had subsided a little and things were settling down to normality, Suppiah Pillai butted in with a bland smile and heartily felicitated Velan.

"Ah, how very foolish of me!" exclaimed Madurai. "Oh, Mr. Pillai, you must pardon us. In our joy we forgot everything.—Here, Vel, but for this kindest of men, we would never have succeeded and we can never repay him. Bow to him, my boy; bow to him," ordered Madurai.

Velan most reverently bowed to Suppiah Pillai, who blessed him with all his heart.

"Don't be misled by Mr. Madurai," said Suppiah Pillai smiling to Velan. "He is a master in the art of praising. He says he is an unlettered man; I wonder what he would be if he were lettered."

"He would oust the Judge from his place," said one mischievous fellow.

"I am sure he would," said Suppiah Pillai laughing.

"And now, all of you must come to my house for dinner. My wife is busy making arrangements to entertain you, in our own humble way, in honour of this happy occasion. It is her special wish that every one of you should come."

"But how does she know?" enquired Madurai.

"I have enough friends to convey the news to her."

"Oh, Mr. Suppiah Pillai!—Vel, the next thing for you is to pay your respects to Madam. She has a heart of gold and has been a mother to all of us.—But, Mr. Pillai," he said turning to him, "I quite appreciate her kind and generous idea.—But is it just that we should burden her with the task of preparing a dinner for so many of us!"

"Mr. Madurai, it is not for you to argue. Nothing is impossible for her when she makes up her mind. If you don't accept her invitation, she will never forgive you, and what is more, she will think I have bungled, and there will be no end of trouble between us," said Suppiah Pillai.

Madurai understood him better than anybody else. "Oh sir, how can we ever think of doing anything to offend either you or madam. I hesitated only because of the trouble we would be giving you. We place ourselves absolutely under your orders," assured Madurai.

"That is a good man," said Suppiah Pillai smiling. "Now the first business for us is to hire a jutka and send Vel home at once. Don't you see he is attracting attention? We don't want every fellow to stare at him, as if he were a wild beast.

Since only four can get into the jutka, some one who knows the way to my house should stay here to guide the rest.—Well, why not stay myself.—”

“Oh, no, sir. You must go along with Vel, and of course, Madurai and Veerappan also will accompany you. I know the way and shall lead the flock,” proffered Arumugam smiling.

Suppiah Pillai accepted his offer gratefully, and calling for a passing jutka, drove home with Velan, Madurai, and Veerappan.

CHAPTER XXI

HAPPY REUNION

Thanks to the enthusiasm of Thayammal, Suppiah Pillai's wife, Madurai and his people were treated to the dinner of their lives. They enjoyed it so well that they made up their minds to acknowledge 'Madam's' kindness in some way or other, whenever an opportunity occurred.

After dinner, the guests took their seats on mats which had been spread on both the spacious pials. A powerful gas light had been hired for the occasion. Under its bright illumination they chatted gaily, as they leisurely helped themselves to "pansupari".

In fact, the appearance was so festive that several people thought that a betrothal ceremony was going on.

But Velan alone, of all the crowd, was pensive. Now and then, he attempted to get into the

general atmosphere of mirth and jollity. But his mind refused to be drawn in, and the clouds of unmistakable distress that often passed over his face were accentuated by his sighs and the twitching on his lips.

Suppiah Pillai, shrewd man that he was, noted his uneasiness.

"What are you worrying about, Vel" he asked gently.

"Oh nothing, sir,—Will they hang Cholan?"

"No, never. I can assure you that he will be awarded the most lenient punishment. I could see that the Judge was most favourably inclined towards him, and I shall not be surprised if he even acquits him on some plea," said Suppiah Pillai.

"Thank God! It is such a relief to me, sir. He behaved so generously that if he were to be hanged, I would never get over my grief for him. I am sure that, but for him, I would not have been acquitted."

"I don't agree. But why rake up those things again? It is purposeless, Vel. You have come through a great crisis in your life, and hereafter there is nothing but happiness in store for you. Think of the lovely girl who is waiting for you, man, and cheer up," said Suppiah Pillai gaily.

Velan's face beamed with a smile.

"Just another day; the day after to-morrow you will be greeting your sweetheart," said Thayammal, in joke.

"The day after to-morrow! Why so late, Madam? We will be home by to-morrow evening."

At this everybody laughed. Velan was covered with confusion.

"I didn't mean Valli. I was thinking of the delay," said Velan, unable at last to contain a smile.

"There is no harm in pining after one's sweetheart," said Thayammal mischievously. "But you can't be home by to-morrow evening. We have discussed everything.—There is no use in shaking your head. Pray, how do you expect to arrive so early?" asked Thayammal, smiling in good humour.

"We will hire jutkas direct from this place to our village," said Velan.

"You should bless yourself if the ponies manage to pull you as far as the Golden Crag," said Suppiah Pillai interposing. "It will be the end of them if the drivers goad them any further for that day."

"Our village is only twelve miles from the Golden Crag—"

"Not twelve but ~~sixteen~~—and not a foot less, I assure you. Don't I know, Vel?" said Suppiah Pillai.

"Well, we can easily walk sixteen miles," said Velan.

Madurai smiled. "After sitting in the jolting jutka for hours, how can you walk sixteen miles, Vel? You are so weak and I am sure you can't stand the strain. As Madam suggested—"

"Ah, I see; it is Madam's work," said Velan, weakly smiling.

"True; but you don't doubt my motive?" said Thayammal.

"How can you say such a thing, Madam? You are just like my mother," said Velan, his eyes expressing boundless gratitude.

"Well then, this is my arrangement. You take your midday meal early, say at ten or eleven. Then after some light refreshment at two in the afternoon, you start by jutkas for the Golden Crag. You will reach it at six o'clock. I shall prepare some supper for you to take with you."

“ Ah, that too ! Madam, you are too kind to us—” began Madurai.

Silencing Madurai with a wave of her arm, Thayammal went on, “ I am told that there are always some bandies at the Golden Crag bound for the south, and particularly to-morrow. Tuesday is market day at the Golden Crag. Isn't that so ? ”

“ There is nothing you don't know, Mother,” said Velan, beaming into a smile.

“ There must be several carts returning to your own village or the neighbouring ones—and most of them empty too. You can't hope for a more comfortable journey. With the moonlight and all, it will be like a picnic party, and you will be home before cock-crow ! I don't see any reason why you should object.”

“ I don't, Mother,” said Velan, much moved by her sincerity and kindness.

The next morning, outside Suppiah Pillai's house and without his knowledge, Madurai, Veerappan, and Arumugam held a consultation.

They felt that, before departing, they should do something to ~~express~~ their gratitude to Suppiah Pillai and Thayammal. They had already made up their minds regarding their future services to the

worthy couple, but just now, to take leave of them without some little present or other seemed to smack of bad manners.

Arumugam was positive about it. He had brought some money to spend in connection with Velan's case, but thanks to the dramatic turn it had taken, he had it still intact. He suggested that, with the help of that money, and anything more they could find by pooling the purses of the rest, they should buy a saree for Thayammal and a dhoti for Suppiah Pillai. The suggestion was unanimously adopted and immediately carried out.

Suppiah Pillai and Thayammal were much displeased that they should have resorted to buying "presents" for them. Thayammal emphatically refused to receive the saree and accused Madurai of complicity in the matter. Whereupon Madurai vehemently protested against her accusation, in mock fury. "If you want the truth, I will tell you. But don't hold me responsible for everything," he said.

"What is that wonderful truth?" demanded Thayammal.

"You see, the idea was entirely Arumugam's, and even when I tried to dissuade him, he overruled me and said that it would be "bad

manners", if we were to take leave of you without showing our gratitude in some way or other. You can ask him—I am not inventing a story.

"That is the truth, Madam," volunteered Arumugam, "The present was never meant to repay your kindness, and it was not at all my idea to—to displease you."

"Talking of pleasing and displeasing, I tell you, Madam," said Madurai, "the present is given just to please ourselves and not *you*. You do everything just as you please, and treat us like children by your kindness. We are after all human beings, and when we try to repay it in our own humble way, you get angry. Is this fair, I ask you?" said Madurai.

"You are an awful man! Well, for the sake of Vel, I accept it," she said, taking the saree into her hands. "And I heartily bless you, Vel, that you may soon get married to a lovely girl."

"He will and shall, Madam. Don't worry; I will see to that," promised Madurai amidst general laughter.

When the hour of parting came, everybody was visibly moved.

Anybody would have thought that they had known one another for years. After many promises

that they would meet again soon, the travellers departed. .

They reached the Golden Crag much sooner than they anticipated. A few people from their village had come to the fair, and they were overjoyed at Velan's release. They were eager to know every detail of the case and importuned Madurai to describe it to them. But they would not enlighten Velan on the state of his father's health.

"With so much of worry, you can't expect him to be in the best of health." But you will see, Vel, he will come round wonderfully. Why, he must have learnt the happy news by now," said Vathiar Sholai, one of the arrivals.

"Of course, you can't have met Pichai and Jambulingam on the way. You must have passed one another somewhere in the night," said Velan more to himself than to Sholai. "I only hope he is not very bad," he sighed.

"Oh, not at all bad, Vel. But if he is living to-day, it is because of Valli. The whole village knows that.—Veerappa, you should be really proud of such a daughter," he said, patting Veerappan on the shoulder and in a way embarrassing him too.

As it was a bright moonlit night, the carts started on their return journey much earlier than was usual, and thanks to a large number of 'empties' among them, everyone was able to secure a comfortable berth. The cool night air, after the day's blistering heat, was very soothing to the nerves, and the quiet beauty of the night, revelling in an immensity of peace and space, was so enchanting that the hearts of the simple folk thawed under its magic spell and flowed out in songs and ballads. Arumugam was easily the noisiest of the lot, for with him there were other influences at work than merely the spell of the beautiful night. At the Golden Crag, he had somehow managed to go on the spree without the knowledge of his friends. Now they could only laugh at his weakness. But everything has an end in this world, and, by and by, sleep and silence descended on the merry caravan.

The bandies reached Veeramangalam in the small hours of the morning. Alamelu, who knew that her boy must arrive by these carts returning from the fair, was sleepless with excited expectation. So the moment she heard the creaking of the wheels, she opened the front door and stood on the pavement, tensely watching the slowly approaching bandies.

Only two bandies were visible, but from the jingling of the bells, it was evident that there were others following a little behind. The two carts came nearer and nearer. Alamelu was in feverish suspense. The first cart had come almost in front of the house. The name of her dear boy trembled on her lips, but the carts passed on without the least interruption of the rhythm of their slow and steady motion. They evidently belonged to some village farther down. With one deep sigh, she tried to pull herself up, but her heart only raced faster, and a vague fear, if not terror, of disappointment began to paralyze her.

Some more carts were coming into view. She rubbed her eyes and wiped the perspiration from her forehead. She found it impossible to stand still, and clasping and unclasping her hands nervously, she was about to get down from the pavement, when some one jumped from the second cart in the caravan, and the beloved voice of her son transfixed her to the spot.

"Oh, Mother ! Mother !! " cried Velan running to her. Alamelu clung to his shoulders and sobbed. Then one by one, Madurai and the rest joined them. It was some time before either Velan or his mother could find speech.

"There! There! you mustn't cry any more, Mother. All troubles are over, and I am here never to leave you," comforted Velan, patting her head, "Is Father awake?" he asked, gently leading her into the house. But she only shook her head conveying nothing, and, caressing his face, cried bitterly. "They have starved you, my child. Oh, the sinners! they have made you a skeleton."

"Don't worry, Mother. I shall pull up in no time. Where is Valli?"

"Ah, Valli. The sweet dear thing! She is yours for ever, my boy," she said without answering his question, and leaning on his arm, accompanied him to Venkatachalam's room. Madurai and Veerappan followed, close on their heels.

The room was lit by a dull kerosine lamp. Venkatachalam was lying on his back, and but for a tiny cloth round his loins, his long body was uncovered.

His limbs had become so lean and his skin so wrinkled that he looked at least twenty years older than what he really was. He was awake and his finger nails were restlessly rubbing against one another.

“Father! Father!!” cried Velan, bending over him and holding his hands.

Venkatachalam gave a violent start. His beady eyes closed and opened in quick succession for the space of a few seconds, and then stared at Velan. The lips moved apart in joy and wonder. “Vel! Vel!! you have come! Oh, my beloved boy!” he cried hugging his head with his wizened arms.

Velan gently disengaged himself after a minute, and took Venkatachalam’s hands into his. “No more bad days for us, Father. We have passed through the worst, and there must be a change for the better. I feel certain about it. Yes, Father, you will see for yourself,” he promised.

“Oh, my child! have you not already removed my heart-ache? I have got you back, my boy, and there is nothing more I desire,” he said.

And noticing for the first time, Madurai and Veerappan, he stretched out his skinny arms to them.

“Come in, come in, my brothers? What a miracle you have worked! Where would I have been without you? Madurai,—Veerappa,—oh, don’t stand there; do come and give me your hands,” he implored.

“My dear Venkatachalam, who are we that you should talk like this? Are we different from you? Ah, my dear fellow, I had no idea that you would be shaken so much!” said Madurai, gently taking hold of one of his hands, and seating himself on the rough couch.

“My dear Venkata, you shouldn’t excite yourself,” advised Veerappan, taking his seat on the other side of the couch. “There is nothing more for you to worry about. Besides a son, you have also a daughter now to care for you. Forget everything and resign yourself to their care. They will soon make a new man of you. Yes, my dear brother, these withered arms—”

Madurai stopped him short with a look of disapproval and incidentally, saw Valli coming in just then.

Disturbed by the noise, she had awakened. Her face was still sleepy and her locks disarranged.

Her dull eyes suddenly sparkled.

“When did you come?” she asked Velan in inexpressible joy, devouring him with her looks.

“Just now. What a ghost you are, Valli!”

“Am I? But — but for your eyes and nose, nobody can recognize you,” she said without taking

her eyes from his face. Her lips began to quiver, and she hung down her head to hide the rushing tears. Then unable to control herself, she slowly walked out of the room. Velan followed her and the elders discreetly kept quiet. The moment he was out of the room, Velan drew her to him and tried to comfort her. She resigned herself to his loving embrace, but the pent up feelings surged forth in uncontrollable sobs. Velan took her away to a lone corner of the house, and by the many tokens of his undying love, soothed her disturbed mind.

“My dearest, don’t you upset yourself. Have I not come back to love and protect you?” he said, covering her face with kisses. But on account of the sudden and frequent intakings of her breath, she was unable to speak and only nestled closer to him.

Slowly she raised her eyes to his. Though the moon was shining brightly, there was not much light where they stood. But still their eyes could speak to one another with all the intensity of their souls. She had collected herself by now. She gave him a hearty kiss and whispered, “Let us go back. It is not right to stay so long.”

But Velan wouldn’t release her.

“Oh, let me go, dear. It will be day-break soon, and you must be hungry. I shall prepare something very nice for you,” she said, giving him another kiss, and went about in search of a match box.

Velan came back to his father's room, trying in vain to conceal his awkwardness. Then Madurai took leave saying that he would look up his people and return soon. Veerappan alone sat on, engaging Venkatachalam in conversation.

CHAPTER XXII

THE IRONY OF LIFE

The day had dawned. Valli and Alamelu were still busy in the kitchen. News of Velan's arrival had spread like wild-fire, and the villagers came streaming in. It was some work for Velan not to displease any one of them. For they were all such hearty fellows—though now and then they perplexed him with awkward questions.

There seemed to be no end to his congratulators, and some of the village bores who had comfortably seated themselves in front of him, showed no indication of moving away. Velan was feeling very tiresome, and yawned helplessly now and then. But his well-meaning tormentors failed to notice his discomfort. However, Valli came to his rescue.

“ Will you come in just for a few minutes?— Oh, Uncle, let him taste something hot and homely

after all these days. I am sure you don't mind my disturbing you," she said turning to the worst of the bores.

"Not at all; not at all," said the man addressed.

"There is plenty of time to talk over these things. Let the poor boy have some rest.—Come to the village *chavadi* (common place of meeting) in the evening, Vel," said another—certainly not one of the bores—and departed. And the bores too had to take leave of Velan reluctantly.

But even as Velan went in, he was aware of the arrival of some others. But Valli gave him no option. She forcibly pushed him before her and closed the door.

"And what about Father?—I mean our fathers," said Velan winking and smiling at Valli.

"Here I am, taking the pudding to them. Your fathers would like to enjoy it together," said Alamelu, her face full of smiles, and went to Venkatachalam's room.

Munching a crumb, Velan kept on gazing at Valli. Valli laughed, and shook her head coquettishly and said, "I shall not run away anywhere,

and if you don't eat, I shall go out of your sight," she threatened.

"But you have served such a lot," protested Velan. "Stop! Jambulingam seems to be searching for me. Let me see what he wants," he said and attempted to get up. But Valli pressed him to his seat and importuned him to finish his breakfast and then go. And Velan swallowed it in quick gulps, much to the disgust of Valli and went out.

Jambulingam was in his father's room. There was a cloud on his face and he was earnestly enquiring of Veerappan about some criminal cases.

"Discussing crime?" said Velan, mixing in their conversation.

"Jambu is suffering from nerves, Vel. He wants to know whether a man who is once acquitted of a charge can be arrested again on the same ground."

"What is the need for that topic now?" asked Velan.

Jambulingam noted the watchful eyes of Venkatachalam and was hesitating whether to speak or not.

“Why, Jambu, what are you thinking about?”

“Nothing particular, Vel. That same Police Sub-Inspector has come to our village with two constables—”

“What a mad man you are! They may have ever so many duties in the village. Why should you imagine that whenever a policeman comes to the village, it is only for me?” said Velan laughing.

“But I heard him enquiring after you, Vel. And that is what makes me nervous.”

“What! Why should he?” said Venkatachalam, his dull eyes suddenly lit by a strange brilliance. His fingers were twitching, and his feet were restlessly kicking the rough cushion.

“I fear you have heard him wrongly, Jambu. I simply can’t believe it,” said Velan, but his voice was troubled.

“I confess I am equally puzzled, Vel. But Pichai should be able to tell us everthing soon. He is watching their movements—”

“Why, here is Pichai coming,” said Velan, quite taken aback by the mad rush of Pichai.

"Vel! Vel! you must run and hide somewhere at once. Those police fellows are searching for you. They will be here soon—"

"Again the Police have come! again!—again! aga—" shrieked Venkatachalam and fell into a fit.

"Oh, Father! Father!" cried Velan and held him tightly. "Pichai, sprinkle ~~some~~ water over his face—Oh, Uncle—Jambu, hold his legs, fetch a key—quick! quick!" he begged. Venkatachalam was in the throes of a terrible convulsion. The pupils of his eyes had almost disappeared into the eyelids. The mouth was twisted in a ghastly contortion. Suddenly his body heaved with a most violent jerk—as if it were under electric shock. Something gurgled in his throat for a few seconds, and then all was still with him. Jambu was fanning furiously; Pichai was bathing his face with a wet towel; and Veerappan was feeling his heart. Veerappan appeared to be dissatisfied. He then felt his pulse, and shook his head mournfully.

"Oh, Uncle, what do you mean?" begged Velan, looking to him most pathetically.

Alamelu was trying in vain to suppress the outburst of her grief. Something awful and solemn had pervaded the room. There was a look of dismay in everybody's face. Velan felt that his

heart was sinking within him. He was conscious that his friends looked at him with a sympathy and concern that were most touching.

“Oh, Uncle! Uncle!! what does it all mean?” he entreated Veerappan, and he seemed so incapable of understanding the truth.

Veerappan too could not speak. His throat was choking. Clearing his throat, he gently drew Velan to him, and, stroking his head, murmured, “No more will the cares of this world trouble him, my boy. He has gone beyond the reach of all his persecutors and their persecutions —” But something seemed to snap in Veerappan’s heart and he wailed bitterly. “What a fate! what a fate!! Oh, Venkata! how little did I know that you would come to this end!”

Alamelu burst into loud weeping. Her grief was inconsolable, and Valli, with tearful eyes, vainly tried to comfort her. But Velan stood like a statue, with eyes cast down. There was not a drop of tear in his eyes. His lips were set, and the muscles of his jaws twitched, as if they were trying to crush something too hard for them. His face seemed to swell. At least, it appeared so to his friends, Jambu and Pichai, who more than anybody else realized the intensity of his suffering.

The sound of weeping had attracted the neighbours on either side, and one of them suggested that the physician, the local barber, might be sent for at once, as there might be still some hope.

And Pichai ran to fetch him—not that he had any hope of a dead man coming to life, but he had something else in his mind. Somehow, he wanted to prevent those horrid “police fellows” from coming in just then, and he hurried out.

And whom should he meet, three or four houses up the street, but Uncle Madurai and the selfsame Police Sub-Inspector, engaged in merry talk! Uncle Madurai was laughing and heartily shaking his hand. Pichai was bewildered. Uncle Madurai was certainly not a fool, and he appeared to be genuinely happy.—No, he was not pretending; he could see that.

“Hullo, Pichai, what a luck for Vel!—and Venkatachalam too! Will you believe it, they are both millionaires! Isn’t it wonderful?” he said with uncontrollable joy.

“I don’t grasp you, Uncle,” said Pichai blinking.

“You can’t, my boy. It is like a fairy tale, but it is true.—You know Appavu, Vel’s father,

emigrated to far off lands. Since we heard nothing from him all these years, we had given him up for dead. But he was not. You may have also heard that he saved the life of an European who greatly befriended him. Well, when the European died some months back, he left half of his estate to Appavu. But within a few weeks, Appavu also followed him—”

“Uncle Appavu also died?” said Pichai aghast.

“What else do I mean, my dear fellow? Poor Appavu had intended to return to our village, but death overtook him before that. But as he was conscious to the end, he had willed that one half of his estate—mind you, it was nearly six lakhs—should be utilized for the maintenance of an Indian Orphanage in Borneo, and the other half to be equally divided between Vel and Venkatachalam! And the Law Officer of that country—he is called the Administrator General or something like that—was made the trustee! Look at his foresight, Pichai.”

Pichai groaned. “How did you learn all this?” he asked, shifting his looks from Madurai to the Police Sub-Inspector.

“Here is our friend who brought the happy news,” he said, pointing to the Sub-Inspector. “You see it became the duty of the Administrator General of that country to trace out Vel and Venkatachalam and hand over to them their share of the property. That wise officer didn’t want to take any risks. So he wrote to our Government, requesting the help of our Police to find out the persons and ascertain the facts. Then, step by step, it fell to our friend’s lot to carry out that duty,” said Madurai, and patted the police officer—rather an unusual liberty for him.

“It has been the most pleasant duty that I have ever performed in my life, Mr. Madurai. I am, so to say, making amends for my previous misconduct,” said the police official, broadly smiling.

“Alas! alas! if we had only known!” sighed Pichai and covered his face with his hands.

“What is the matter, Pichai?” said Madurai, a little alarmed.

“Uncle, — Uncle Venkatachalam is no more!”

“No more! What are you talking? Have you gone mad?”

"No, no. I am quite sane," cried Pichai, shaking his head most miserably. "Oh, sir, when we saw you again, we were greatly upset. We thought—Oh Lord, we believed that you had come back to re-arrest Vel! Uncle Venkatachalam fell into a dreadful fit, and it was a life and death struggle for him. Then, with one groan, he expired. Oh Uncle! it was ~~all~~ so quick that it took our breath away," he mourned.

"He died! Venkatachalam died! No, no. I can't believe it.—Oh Venkata! Oh, you hapless sinner! What have you done? Oh, my dear Venkata! Venkata!!" he cried and trotted towards Venkatachalam's house, clutching his stomach in both hands, as if a dead weight were tugging at it.

"How tragic!" said the Sub-Inspector, quite dazed. "Couldn't any of you have asked me? Why should you think that a policeman has no other work but harassing people? Oh God! I feel awfully sorry. In plain words; the old man wouldn't have died but for me. Isn't that so?—and that when he stepped into a fabulous fortune! It is really very bad; but how am I responsible for it?—what idiots you are! Well, young man, I shall call on some other occasion to condole your friend; and for God's sake, don't commit a similar mistake

again and kill somebody else," he said with great disgust and went away followed by his orderlies.

Pichai ran back to his friend's house.

The commotion had increased there. Several people had collected. The women were weeping. Velan was squatting on his heels, holding his head in his hands. His eyes were dry as dust, and his looks were vacant. And, but for the occasional clearing of his throat, there was no sign of life in him.

But Madurai was quite different ; he was crying like a child. Pichai had never suspected that Uncle Madurai would be so weak.

"What an irony ! What an irony !! Oh my Venkata, did you get the fortune only to die ? To die on the threshold of success !—Even in your wildest dream, you would not have hoped to make so much money. If you had only lived for another day, nay, another hour, and known of your triumph, what a consolation would it be ! But now—can lakhs bring you back to life ? " he mourned.

Veerappan was knitting his brows in perplexity. Pichai began to doubt whether the object of the Sub-Inspector's visit had been made known to Velan ; and he gently informed him that the Sub-Inspector had gone away.

"The Sub-Inspector, the Sub-Inspector," repeated Velan, slowly recovering from his stupor. "Last time they got me for no murder; but this time they shall give me full satisfaction—the rascals!" he said jumping to his feet.

"Oh Vel! Vel! the Sub-Inspector didn't come to arrest you. He brought you the good news of your fortune," said Pichai, holding him tightly.

"Fortune! Is it my fortune to watch my father die in the fullness of his misery? What are you talking?— Are you ridiculing?"

Madurai suddenly remembered.

"Ah, my beloved boy, I have lost my wits.— I forgot— Oh, Vel, Appavu died some months back and has left six lakhs to you and that great sinner," he said, pointing to the dead man.

An exclamation of wonder and pity escaped everybody.

"The Sub-Inspector came only to verify your identity," added Pichai.

"My father died! My "Papa" died!— and I get six lakhs! Wonderful!" said Velan laughing ironically.

“One can buy the whole of our village,” said some one with ill-concealed admiration and amazement.

“What if I can buy the whole world?” said Velan flaring. “What is it to me without my “Papa”? His mind was seared and it rankled to the end without peace; his body was diseased and it ailed to the end without being healed — all for want of money! And now I get a fortune! What a mockery! No, no; I have finished with everything,” he said, wringing his hands most violently and talking to himself.

Madurai gently patted him. “Vel! Vel! take it easy, my boy. It is hard, very hard. Don’t I know it? Oh God! don’t I know?” he said, trying to cheer Velan, but, on the contrary, he betrayed his own helplessness.

“You don’t know, Uncle; nor do I know— why, very few of us know. But I want to know the secret of these happenings. So I have made up my mind to roam the world, to go to Kashi, the Himlayas— anywhere, to seek the help of the sages to understand this mystery of life. As soon as the rites are over, I am off. Riches have no more use for me. Yes, Uncle, I have finished with everything—finished,” he said waving his hands wildly.

His manner alarmed Madurai, and put him on the alert.

“Gently, gently, my boy,” he coaxed. “Birth and Death are the Lord’s decree. Who can go against His will? Who can escape death? And no man made of flesh and blood can avoid the pangs of sorrow. But it is up to us to put up with our sufferings patiently. The world cannot die with the dead, and after the dead, the living have got their duties. Let us bury him in the “Snail Farm” he loved so dearly, build a tomb over his grave, and plant all around it beautiful flower beds—”

Velan laughed ironically.

“What an idea! Will he be aware of it, Uncle? Will it give him any satisfaction? If the dead could only appreciate such things, what would I not do for all the departed ones? No, no, I don’t understand it at all, Uncle. What is the meaning of this life?—the purpose of this endless struggle? How shall I requit the love of my Papa? Has he not left me an eternal debtor? I feel—Oh Lord! I shall have no peace so long as I live, if I do not know how to discharge it. I *must* know how, and there must be some great ones who can put me in the way. You have no idea of the heavy weight that is pulling down my heart. I

must run away somewhere, anywhere—I must run, run to have this weight removed,” he said pathetically, placing his hand on his heart.

“Vel! steady, steady! Don’t be foolish. What about your mother—”

“My Mother!” said Velan, and was paralyzed by the many thoughts the words provoked. He turned his gaze on his “Mamma”. She was weeping her heart out and was dead to everything else. Then his looks slowly travelled to Valli. Her tearful eyes seemed to have no other object in view but himself, and the lips, quivering in agonies, betrayed her powerlessness to control herself any longer. And when his eyes met hers, she heaved a suppressed sob and swooned.

Velan rushed to her and raised her in his arms.

“Valli! Valli!” he crooned. She was still gasping for breath, but had recovered her consciousness.

“Don’t!—don’t leave me alone! Take me along with you wherever you go,” she begged in bated breath. Velan gazed at her pale and suppliant face. He was at once awed and fascinated by something deep and powerful in the

appeal of her eyes—and yet, they were so expressive of her self-denial and self-surrender! He stood like one bewitched, and fancied that he saw in those looks something of the purpose of life.

Then he gently murmured his assurance that nothing would part them.

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